

Brief History of the American Flag

On June 14, 1777, the Continental Congress passed the first Flag Act, establishing that “the flag of the United States be made of thirteen stripes, alternating red and white: that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field.” The date of this first Flag Act is honored and remembered as we celebrate Flag Day on June 14th every year. Several acts followed between then and 1960 that changed or defined the shape and design of the flag. In 1795, the number of stars and stripes increased to 15 to reflect the entry of Vermont and Kentucky into the Union. This flag of 15 stars and 15 stripes, is the one that flew over Fort McHenry and inspired Francis Scott Key to write what has become our National Anthem. In April of 1818, a new Act, signed by President Monroe, provided for 13 stripes to represent the 13 original colonies, and one star for each state, to be added to the flag on the 4th of July following a state’s admission to the Union, President Eisenhower, through executive orders in 1959, provided for the specific arrangement of the stars on their blue field. So, today we honor the American flag, which consists of thirteen horizontal stripes, seven red alternating with six white, and fifty white stars on a field of blue.

The Meaning of Our Flag's Colors and Symbols

When our American Flag was first designed, most of its features were borrowed from the Grand Union Flag which was the first national flag of the United States. Like the current flag, it had 13 red and white stripes, but in the upper inner corner of the flag, there was a red, white, and blue British Union Flag instead of stars. It wasn’t until the designing of the Great Seal of the United States that the colors were given meaning. Charles Thomson, secretary of the Continental Congress, said of the Great Seal’s symbolism, “White signifies purity and innocence; Red, hardiness and valor; and Blue signifies vigilance, perseverance, and justice.” The meaning stuck and was applied to both the Great Seal and the American Flag. So, while there is no official assignment of meaning to the colors of the flag, Thomson’s words have carried on in custom and tradition.

And what about the stars and stripes? We know that that the 50 stars represent the 50 states, and the 13 stripes represent the 13 original colonies, but why stripes and stars? According to the House of Representatives’ 1977 book about the flag, “The star is a symbol of the heavens and the divine goal to which man has aspired from time immemorial; and the stripe is symbolic of the rays of light emanating from the sun.”

Divine goals, the sun’s powerful, life-giving rays, purity, valor, vigilance, perseverance, justice - these are the meanings of the colors and symbols that unite to become our American Flag.

I Am Your Flag

I am your flag. I was born on June 14, 1777. I am more than just a piece of cloth shaped into a colorful design. I am the refuge of the world’s oppressed people. I am the silent sentinel of freedom. I am the emblem of the greatest sovereign nation on earth; I am the inspiration for which American Patriots gave their lives and fortunes. I have led your sons into battle from Valley Forge to the dry deserts of Iraq.

I walked in silence with each of your honored dead to their final resting piece, beneath the silent white crosses row upon row. I have flown through peace and war, strife, and prosperity, and amidst it all I have been respected.

“Old Glory” is my nickname; proudly I wave on high! Honor me, respect me, and defend me with your lives and your fortunes. Never let my enemies tear me down from my lofty position lest I never return. Keep alight the fires of patriotism, strive earnestly for the spirit of democracy, and keep me always as a symbol of freedom and liberty in our country.

I am now old and faded, do not let me fly in disrepair, rather retire me from my duties only to replace me with a new flag so that I may continue to symbolize our country - one nation under God - the United States of America.

Complements of Johnathan Sack, First Officer of Trail Life Troop, NJ-0777