

THE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN FLAG

Heraldry is as old as the human race. The carrying of banners has been a custom among all people in all ages. These banners usually contain some concept of the life or government of those who fashion them.

The evolution of the American Flag marks the progression of the government of the American People.

From the founding of Jamestown in Virginia in 1607 until 1775, the flag of England was the Flag of the Peoples of America.

In 1775, the Pine Tree Flag was adopted for all colonial vessels, and this was the banner carried by the Continental forces in the Battle of Bunker Hill.

The Southern colonies from 1776 to 1777 used the Snake Flag.



In the latter part of 1775, the Continental Congress appointed a committee to consider the question of a single flag for thirteen colonies. That committee recommended a design of thirteen alternate stripes of red and white, with an azure field in the upper corner bearing the red cross of St. George and the white cross of St. Andrew. John Paul Jones, the senior lieutenant of the flagship “Alfred”, hoisted this flag to the masthead on December 3, 1775, and one month later it was raised over the headquarters of General Washington at Cambridge, Massachusetts, “In compliment” as he wrote, “to the United Colonies”.



This Flag, called “The Continental Colors”, and “The Grand Union”, was never carried in the field by the Continental land forces, but it was used by the Navy as its exclusive ensign, and was the first American Flag to receive a salute of honor, a salute of eleven guns from the Fort of Orange in the Dutch West Indies.

In response to a general demand for a banner more representative of our country, the Congress, on June 14, 1777 provided:

“That the Flag of the United States be thirteen stripes of alternating red and white; and that the union be thirteen stars, white on a blue field, representing a new constellation.”

It is generally believed, that in May or June of 1776, a committee consisting of George Washington, Robert Morris and George Ross commissioned Betsy Ross, a Philadelphia Quakeress, to make a Flag from a rough design they left with her. It is said that she suggested that the stars should



have five points, rather than six. This starry banner was first flown at Fort Stanwix, called Fort Schuyler at the time, near the city of Rome, New York, on August 3, 1777, and was under fire three days later at the battle of Oriskany, August 6, 1777, during a British and Indian attack.

The first official salute to the Stars and Stripes was given on February 14, 1778, by France on the French coast, when the “Ranger” under command of John Paul Jones, was saluted by the French fleet.

This Flag, then carried by the “Ranger” was made by young women of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, from stripes of their best colored silk dresses and the white wedding gown of a recent bride.

It is said that this same “Ranger’s” Flag was flown by Jones’ ship, the “Bon Homme Richard”, in its thrilling flight by moonlight upon the high seas, with the British frigate “Serapis”. When the “Serapis” struck her colors, the immortal fame of John Paul Jones was ensured as the intrepid defender of the youthful republic.

The original thirteen Stars and Stripes represented the original thirteen colonies. In 1795, two additional Stars and Stripes were added to represent admission to the Union of Vermont and Kentucky. Under this banner of Stars and Stripes, was fought the War of 1812. It was the sight of it flying over Fort McHenry on September 14, 1814, that inspired Francis Scott Key to write what was to become our national anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner”.

Miss Margaret Young who cut the stars for that particular banner, was the mother of Henry Sanderson, the Grand Exalted Ruler of the Order of the Elks in 1884.



The Congress, on April 14, 1818, adopted a resolution, that on and after July 4, 1818, the number of stripes should be thirteen, and that the blue field should carry one star for each of the twenty states in the union and that a new star should be added for each additional state thereafter admitted.

Since 1818, there has been no change in the Flag design except that twenty-eight new stars were added before July 4, 1912, and this Flag of forty-eight stars flew over this nation for forty-seven years until just before the Vietnam War.

On July 4, 1959, a star was added for Alaska, our first non-connected state, and a year later, Hawaii, our island state, added a fiftieth star. Our present Flag, fifty stars and thirteen stripes. It is accompanied by the POW-MIA Flag to recognize the plight and demise of a special group of our Armed Services, those who were prisoners of war or still remain missing in action.



As this emblem is the first in our hearts as loyal Americans, so is it close to our Altar as loyal Elks. The gentle breezes with lingering caress kiss the folds of no Flag which can compare with it in beauty. There is no such red in budding rose, in falling leaf, or sparkling wine; no such white in April blossom, in crescent moon or mountain snow; no such blue in women's eye, in ocean's depth, or heaven's dome; and no such pageantry of clustering stars and streaming light in all the spectrum of the sea and sky.

Our Flag is at once a history, a declaration, and a prophecy. It represents the American nation as it was at its birth; it speaks for what it is today; and it holds the opportunity for the future to add other stars to the glorious constellation.

The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks is the first and only fraternal body to require formal observance of "Flag Day". In July of 1908, the Grand Lodge of this Order, at Dallas, Texas, then assembled, provided for the annual nationwide observance of "Flag Day" on the 14th of June in each year, by making it mandatory upon each Local Lodge of the Order.

This unique distinction as the strongest promoter of "Flag Day" is most becoming to the Order of Elks. This Order is distinctively American. Only American citizens are eligible to join it, and it has no foreign affiliations. It has linked its destiny with the destiny of our country and made this Flag its symbol of self-dedication to God, to country, and to fellow men.

The Stars and Stripes, Flag of the United States of America! The world-wide hope of all who, under God, would be free to live and do his will.

Upon its folds it written the story of America – the epic of the mightiest and noblest in all history.

In the days when peoples of the old world groveled in abject homage to the heresy of "the divine right of Kings", a new constellation appeared in the western skies, the Stars and Stripes, symbolizing the divine right of

all, to life, liberty, happiness, and peace under endowment by their Creator.

To what man or woman is given words adequate to tell the story of the building of this nation? That immortal story is written in blood and sweat, in heroic deeds, and unremitting toil, in clearing the primeval forests and in planting of vast prairies where once the coyote and buffalo roamed. Onward swept the nation, spanning wide rivers, leaping vast mountain ranges, leaving in its path, villages, and farms, factories and cities, till at least this giant nation stood astride the continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

This is the heritage of the people of the United States. It has been repurchased by each succeeding generation and must be re-won again, again, and again, until the end of time, lest it too shall pass like the ancient Empires of Greece and Rome.

“The price of liberty is eternal vigilance”. What was won at Lexington and Concord, and Bunker Hill, had to be repurchased at Ticonderoga and Yorktown.

What John Paul Jones achieved upon the high seas in the War of Independence, had to be repurchased by Commodore Perry on Lake Erie in the War of 1812.

The prestige of Admiral Dewey’s victory at Manila Bay in 1898 was re-won by the naval battles in the seas about the far distant islands of the Pacific, after the sneak attacks on Pearl Harbor and Manila in 1941 had summoned our country to assume its role in World War II.

What our troops achieved under the Stars and Stripes at Chateau-Thierry and Flanders in World War I, their sons were required to repurchase in World War II in the bloody trek across northern Africa, on the beachheads of Europe, and in the Battle of the Bulge.

The Flag our American men raised at Iwo Jima was the same Flag later raised in the defense of Inchon, Pusan, and Pork Chop Hill in far-off Korea. Then another generation under the same Flag, bled to stem the threat of communism in far-off Vietnam.

Our young people were again called to carry our flag in the defense of a free world in the actions in Grenada and Panama. Willingly, our brave men and women carried our Flag and the honor of the American people into battle in Operation Desert Storm.

And who among us will ever forget the sight of firefighters raising our Flag over the ruins of the World trade Center, the military personnel draping our Flag on the side of the Pentagon, or the citizens of Somerset County, Pennsylvania, placing our Flag near the site where brave Americans died fighting the hijackers of Flight No. 93? No other symbol could have offered such comfort, as we still today, endure the horrors of that day.

Today, American Armed Forces carry our Flag in the villages of Iraq, the mountains of Afghanistan and the jungles of the Philippines, and wherever terrorism may reside. Their struggle against the sponsors of terrorism is the hardest battle yet, and this threat to our Nation, and to our way of life, is certainly as great a challenge as our Flag has ever seen.

The resurgence of patriotism sine September 11, 2001, has rekindled respect for our Flag. Today, we see the Star-Spangled Banner wherever we turn, on homes, businesses, automobiles, and billboards. Such displays stimulate our love for our Nation and for what it stands; they remind us of the sacrifices being made by the men and women of our Armed Forces around the world; and, they are a tribute to the heroes of the Police and fire Departments the Nation over.

The greatest significance of this Flag, however, lies in the influence it has in the hearts and minds of millions of people. It has waved over the unparalleled progress of a nation in developing democratic institutions, scientific and technological knowledge, education, and culture. It has served as a beacon for millions of poor and oppressed refugees abroad and stands as a promise that the under-privileged will not be forgotten.

What is the meaning of the Flag of the United States? There can never be a definitive answer to that question. There are people in the world who see it as a symbol of imperialism; others see it as a destiny of the people. But reference to these and similar views of the flag was resolved by Woodrow Wilson when he said: “This Flag, which we honor, and under which we serve, is the emblem of our unity, our power, our thought, and shape of this nation. It has no other character than that which we give it from generation to generation. The choices are ours”.

Only love, true love of our fellow man, can create peace. The emblem and token of that love is the Stars and Stripes, the symbol of the American way of life.



The Stars and Stripes, Flag of the United States of America!



VFW Post 2123 of Winchester Honor Guard – 21-Gun Salute

