

THE FLAG SPEAKS

Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits

“I am whatever you make me - nothing more. But always I am all that you hope to be and have the courage to try for. I am song and fear, struggle and panic, and ennobling hope. I am the day’s work of the weakest man and the largest dream of the most daring. I am the Constitution and the courts, statues and statue makers, soldier and dreadnaught, drayman and street sweep, cook, counselor and clerk. I am no more than what you believe me to be. My star and my stripes are your dreams and your labor. For you are the makers of the flag, and it is well that you glory in the making.” (F.K. Lane)

The history of our national flag parallels that of our country. The pattern for the Stars and Stripes came from several origins just as the people came from many lands to settle in this new country. The star, as a symbol of the heavens and the divine goal to which man has aspired; the stripe, as a symbol of the rays of light coming from the sun, are themes that have been represented in the standards of many nations.

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The first flags adopted by our colonial forefathers symbolized their struggles with a new land and included representation of everything from beavers, pine trees, rattlesnakes and anchors as well as various mottos such as ‘Hope’, ‘Liberty’ and ‘Don’t Tread on Me’.

Any resemblance to our present flag occurred during the colonial period as what became known as the Grand Union Flag, sometimes referred to as the Congress

Colors. It had thirteen stripes alternately red and white, representing the thirteen colonies with a blue field in the upper left-hand corner bearing the crosses of St. George and St. Andrew, signifying union with the mother country. This was used by the Colonial Fleet in 1775. The Grand Union Flag was the standard of the Continental Army when they were formed in January 1776.

Many Americans still believe that Betsy Ross made the first flag, although historians dispute this story. Elizabeth Grisco, a Philadelphia flag maker who was also known as Betsy Ross, was said to have sewed the first ‘official’ flag in June 1776. The legend goes that George Washington, Robert Morris and George Ross came to Betsy’s house to discuss the design of a national flag. The original design had six-sided stars representing the thirteen colonies on a field of blue with red and white stripes. She suggest a five-pointed star which could be cut more quickly. There doesn’t seem to be any conclusive evidence supporting or denying this story.

Another disputed story is that the first Stars and Stripes displayed in the face of an armed enemy was at Fort Schuyler on August 3, 1777. The flag was an improvised one, consisting of the white from a soldier’s shirt; a captain’s cloak supplied the blue of the union; and the red stripes came from the flannel petticoat of a soldier’s wife who gladly donated it for the purpose of doing the best that they could to represent the flag of their country.

The Continental Congress passed a resolution that established the Stars and Stripes as the official flag on June 14, 1777, but did not specify the arrangement of the thirteen stars on the blue union except to say that they should represent a new constellation. The resolution states: “Resolved that the Flag of the United States be 13 stripes alternate red and white, that the Union be 13 stars white in a blue field representing a new constellation.”



George Washington, when the Star Spangled Banner was first flown by the Continental Army, is said to have described its symbolism as follows: “We take the stars from heaven, the red from our mother country, separating it by white stripes, thus showing that we have separated from her, and the white stripes shall go down to posterity representing liberty.”

After the Declaration of Independence colonial vessels were put to sea to hamper communications and prey on British commerce. Many of them flew flags of the particular Colony to which they belonged. An authorized national flag was urgently needed for these vessels. Without such a flag, they would be considered as pirate ships and if caught, the crews would be hung.

At first, when new states were admitted into the Union, the flags were made with an additional stripe and star added for each state. Realizing that the flag would become unwieldy with such additions, Captain Samuel C. Reid, USN, suggested to Congress that the stripes remain thirteen in number to represent the thirteen Colonies and that a star be added to the blue field for each new State coming into the Union. On April 4, 1818, a law was passed that a star be added on the 4th of July after each new state’s admission to the Union.

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The first recognized celebration in New York was held on June 14, 1889. Professor George Bloch, principal of a free kindergarten for underprivileged children in New York City, arranged ceremonies to commemorate the anniversary of the Congressional resolution establishing a flag for the United States. This caught the attention of the State Department of Education and ensured that Flag Day was to be observed in all public schools.

It took many years to convince Congress to make Flag Day official. In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson issued a proclamation that stated June 14th was to become a day of observance, honoring our flag. It wasn’t until 1949 that President Harry Truman signed the Act of Congress making June 14th an official National holiday. It has never become an official Federal holiday.

As stated by then Governor of New York Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1929: “We should accordingly rejoice on the occasion which is hereby set aside as Flag Day, and by a universal display of the flag from all the homes of the State, places of business and public buildings, honor the flag, renew our allegiance to it and reflect on the privilege of American citizenship and our faith and devotion to American ideals and institutions.”

It is especially important in this 250th anniversary year of our country, to remember all of the things our flag stands for and to renew our commitment to treat it with reverence and respect.