If you ask ten Americans who designed the United States flag, five will say Betsy Ross with confidence, a couple will hedge with Francis Hopkinson, and the rest will recall some version of the story they heard in grade school. The reality is more interesting than a single name. It is a blend of workshop skill, committee decisions, and wartime improvisation, with a paper trail that points one direction and a cherished legend that points another. Understanding that mix does not drain the romance from the flag, it thickens it. Craft, law, memory, and national identity all had a hand in those stars and stripes.

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What the first flags looked like, and what they tried to say

Before there was a "United States," there were 13 colonies turned 13 states trying to signal unity without pretending that ties to Britain had never existed. The Continental Army fought under a banner historians call the Grand Union Flag. It flew as early as late 1775. It had 13 red and white stripes, the pattern we still see, but in the canton, instead of stars, it carried the British Union Jack. That flag sent a layered message during the awkward months when some leaders still hoped for reconciliation: we are one people here, but the parent still sits in the corner.

Once independence was declared, keeping the Union Jack in the corner no longer made sense. Naval vessels needed a clear national ensign, and forts and regiments needed a signal that meant the new republic, not the old empire. That urgency set the stage for the Stars and Stripes.

The Flag Resolution that launched a thousand designs

On June 14, 1777, the Continental Congress passed a simple instruction: “Resolved, that the flag of the United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white, that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation.” There was no diagram, no measurements, no rule about whether the stars should have five or six points, and no instruction on how to arrange them. It did not answer the modern questions kids bring home from school: Why does the American flag have 13 stripes? What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent? The answers grew over time. Thirteen stripes honored the original 13 states. As the nation grew, stars marked membership in that union, the tally climbing to 50 as of July 4, 1960, when Hawaii’s star joined the field.

Because Congress left so much unsaid in 1777, early flags varied a lot. Some makers stitched stars in a tight circle. Others lined them in rows. The points could be five or six. Blue could be a deep navy or a lighter shade, depending on available dyes. You can sense the improvisation if you stand in front of genuine 18th century flags in a museum, their hand-cut stars a little uneven, their red more brick than fire engine. They were made quickly, used hard, and meant to be seen at a distance on wind and water.

Betsy Ross, a family story that captured a nation

“Did Betsy Ross really sew the first flag?” This is the question that refuses to fade, and it owes its persistence to a powerful family narrative. In 1870, nearly a century after the Revolution, William Canby, Betsy Ross’s grandson, gave a talk at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. He shared sworn statements from relatives who recalled Betsy telling them that an important committee, including George Washington, came to her upholstery shop in Philadelphia and asked her to sew a flag. In their telling, she suggested five-point stars because they could be cut quickly from folded cloth. The circle of 13 stars we now call the “Betsy Ross flag” came to symbolize that account.

There is no surviving document from the 1770s that confirms the meeting or the commission, which has led many historians to treat the story carefully. That is not the same as calling it false. Betsy Ross, born Elizabeth Griscom, did make flags. She advertised as an upholsterer, a trade that, in the 18th century, covered tent work, sails, banners, and bed hangings. She had connections to military supply networks in Philadelphia, and it would not be surprising at all if she produced flags for state or federal use. What we lack is a receipt, letter, or ledger entry that ties her to the very first official Stars and Stripes.

When I first handled a reproduction of an 18th century five-point star cut the way the Ross story describes, I understood why that detail stuck. You fold, notch one snip, unfold, and a perfect star drops into your hand. Anyone who sewed for a living would favor that method over fussy six-point stars assembled from triangles. The technique feels genuine. Whether the famous meeting happened as remembered is the part historians debate.

Francis Hopkinson, the paper trail, and a designer’s claim

Francis Hopkinson of New Jersey, a lawyer, judge, and signer of the Declaration of Independence, left a different kind of trail. He served on the Continental Navy Board and on committees tasked with creating national symbols. In 1777, he drew designs for the Great Seal and for naval flags. Surviving sketches from

him show arrangements of stars, often six-pointed, and striped motifs. Later that year and into 1778, he wrote to Congress seeking payment for his work designing “the flag of the United States,” among other items, cheekily asking for a cask of wine at one point when cash was tight.

Congress declined to pay, not because the work was imaginary, but because Hopkinson held public office at the time. That does not read like a denial of authorship. It reads like a spending rule. The Navy Board records, his correspondence, and the timing line up well enough that many historians credit Hopkinson as the primary designer who translated Congress’s short resolution into a working pattern. He was not a seamster. He did not sit at a shop cutting stars. He sketched, specified, and helped standardize for government use, exactly the sort of design work that professionals do when a client brings a short brief and a great need.

Hopkinson sometimes drew six-point stars. Early American flags sometimes used six-point stars, too. Yet the five-pointed star quickly became the dominant form, probably because it is faster to make in cloth and, on a waving field, looks crisp. If Betsy Ross and other upholsterers had a say in that choice, their practical judgment would have carried weight.

So who designed the American flag?

It depends what you mean by designed. If you mean the person whose documented work tied the “new constellation” to a reproducible federal pattern, Francis Hopkinson fits. If you mean the artisan who cut, stitched, and brought it to life for use on ships and at headquarters, then credit lies with the flag makers in Philadelphia and elsewhere, possibly including Betsy Ross. If you broaden design further, to the political idea that the states should be symbolized as stars on a field of blue, then Congress and its committees share the role. The flag is a product of law, drafting, and craft.

What was the first American flag called?

The first banner to fly for the united colonies is often called the Continental Colors or the Grand Union Flag. That flag predates the Stars and Stripes and kept the British Union Jack in the canton. The first official flag of the United States under the 1777 resolution is the “Stars and Stripes.” In common speech, people also called it the “Star-Spangled Banner,” the nickname that stuck after Francis Scott Key wrote his poem during the War of 1812.

Why 13 stripes, and why stars at all?

Thirteen stripes for thirteen states seems obvious today, but it was not a given. Stripes had appeared on colonial flags and regimental banners. They carry well across distance and flutter dramatically. Thirteen made a bolder statement than the subtle device on the Great Seal. Stars, in turn, offered a way to represent political units as equal points of light, not stacked or ranked. A constellation is a pattern made of separate bodies. That logic suited a federal union.

When people ask, Why does the American flag have 13 stripes?, the simplest answer is historical. The stripes honor the founding set. In 1795, after Vermont and Kentucky joined, Congress briefly increased both the stars and the stripes to 15. That is the version that flew over Fort McHenry. The 1818 law, responding to visual clutter as more states queued up, fixed the stripes at 13 permanently, a nod to origins, and ordered a new star for each new state.

The colors, and what they mean when you are honest about it

Why are the colors red, white, and blue used in the American flag? The 1777 resolution did not provide a rationale. The palette tracked British and colonial practice. When the Continental Congress approved the Great Seal in 1782, it set out meanings for the same colors: red for valor and hardiness, white for purity and innocence, blue for vigilance, perseverance, and justice. Those words now get quoted as if they were drafted for the flag. They were not. Still, they were adopted by the same generation, and the associations have endured. Ask veterans and you will hear their own readings, layered over the official phrases. A Marine I interviewed years ago said the red reminded him of sacrifice, the white of empty space that must be guarded, and the blue of deep water under a carrier at night. That is not in any manual, but it tells you how symbolism lives on.

If you prefer a stricter historian's answer to What is the meaning behind the American flag colors?, say this: the colors were used because they already carried weight in Anglo-American heraldry, and the 1782 Great Seal supplied meanings that Americans later associated with the flag.

How many versions of the American flag have there been?

If you count official national flags that changed with the number of stars since 1777, there have been 27 versions, the last adopted on July 4, 1960 after Hawaii's admission in 1959. That number refers to formal, legal designs where the star count matched the union. Within each era, especially before 1912, there were many variations in star arrangement and proportions. A ship's ensign from 1795 might stand six feet on the hoist, with stars scattered in a rosette, while a fort garrison flag from the same year could be a vast sheet with neat rows.

It helps to picture the changes as a staircase. Each new state added a riser, and the flag grew a new star the next July 4. Only twice did the stripes change, first to 15 in 1795, then back to 13 in 1818. In the 20th century, presidents stepped in to nail down consistent layouts. President Taft, in 1912, issued an order that fixed the arrangement and proportions for the 48 star flag. Later orders specified the 49 and 50 star patterns with staggered rows to fit the field.

A brief timeline of key steps

- 1775: The Grand Union Flag with 13 stripes and the Union Jack in the canton begins use.
- June 14, 1777: Congress passes the Flag Resolution creating the Stars and Stripes with 13 stars.
- 1795: Congress adopts a 15 star, 15 stripe flag for Vermont and Kentucky.
- 1818: The Flag Act returns stripes to 13, adds one star per new state each July 4.
- 1912 to 1960: Executive orders standardize arrangements, culminating in the 50 star flag.

Betsy Ross vs. Francis Hopkinson, weighed with a cool head

- Documentary evidence: Hopkinson's letters and invoices from 1777 to 1778 refer to designing the flag of the United States. No comparable 1770s document ties Betsy Ross to the first official flag.
- Role: Hopkinson worked as a government designer and committee member. Ross worked as an upholsterer and flag maker serving military needs.
- Stars: Hopkinson's sketches show both six and five point stars. The Ross family story highlights a five point star cutting method, which was practical and widely used.

- Attribution: Congress rejected Hopkinson's payment, citing his public office, not disputing his authorship. The Ross story was publicized in 1870, nearly a century after the fact, through family affidavits.
- Likelihood: Hopkinson likely produced the specifications that defined the national flag. Ross likely made flags and may have sewn early Stars and Stripes, but we cannot prove she made the very first.

This does not make Betsy Ross a mere footnote. It puts her where many skilled women of the era stood, central to supply and symbol making, rarely named in federal paperwork. It also shows how nations choose stories that fit the values they want to highlight. A woman at a worktable, sharp with her shears, feels true to the American character, which is one reason the legend endures.

Star patterns, improvisation, and the road to standardization

In the early decades, the arrangement of stars was a matter of taste and shop practice. The circular cluster that bears Ross's name appeared in several early flags. So did rows, hexagonal circuits, and a "Great Star" pattern where smaller stars form a larger one. On some naval jacks, you see stars packed in like seeds, not quite aligned. Flag makers balanced symmetry with the realities of cloth width and quick production. A block print could guide where to place stars, but when a ship needed sails patched and a flag replaced before the tide turned, aesthetics yielded to speed.

As the nation expanded to the Mississippi and then the Pacific, the field grew crowded. That is where modern geometry entered. The 48 star flag adopted in 1912 placed six rows of eight stars, neatly staggered. The 49 star flag in 1959 arranged seven rows of seven. The 50 star flag introduced in 1960 uses nine rows of alternating five and six stars. That pattern fills the canton efficiently and pleases the eye at a distance.

When was the American flag first created?

If you mean when the Stars and Stripes became official, the date is June 14, 1777, the day of the Flag Resolution. If you mean when an American military banner first flew in the field to represent a union of colonies, that traces to the Grand Union Flag in late 1775. If you mean when a specific piece of cloth we would recognize as the modern flag was first sewn, the best you can say is mid to late 1777, likely in Philadelphia, for use by the government or the Navy.

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The flag in law and in daily life

Title 4 of the United States Code describes the flag’s proportions and treatment. The Flag Code is advisory rather than punitive, a guide to respectful use rather than a criminal statute. Beyond the law, the flag picks up practical traditions. On ships, it marks nationality and draws friendly or hostile salutes. In schools, it anchors memory. On ballfields, it frames ritual. Those customs evolve. During the Civil War, regiments carried flags heavy with shot, their stripes repair-stitched in field hospitals. In the space age, the flag was engineered with a horizontal rod so it would appear to fly on the Moon’s airless surface. The symbol adapts, the core remains.

How the flag has changed over time, with more than stars to tell the story

Counting stars is one way to read American growth. There are subtler changes worth noticing. Early flags used wool bunting, a loosely woven textile that shed water and dried quickly. The weave and dye lots varied, so a fresh flag might look almost pink in one stripe and brick red in the next. Hand stitching left seams that tell you about the maker’s training. After the Industrial Revolution, cotton and then synthetic fabrics entered service. Printed flags became common for parades. By the late 19th century, brass grommets replaced hand sewn rope cringles. Proportions settled as standards, especially after 1912, which is why a 48 star flag from 1943 looks more like a 50 star flag from today than like a 13 star flag from 1780.

Culturally, the flag has stood for different things at different moments. In 1794, it was a young merchant’s emblem on a mast leaving Philadelphia. In 1863, it meant the Union to soldiers at Gettysburg. In 1918, it draped a coffin returning from France. During the civil rights era, it appeared in marches as both promise and demand. Those meanings are not contradictions. They are layers.

Unraveling common questions without sugarcoating

Who designed the American flag? If you have to name one person, say Francis Hopkinson, backed by documentary evidence. Add that makers like Betsy Ross most likely sewed early versions, and that the flag as we know it emerged from a conversation between law, design, and craft.

How many versions of the American flag have there been? Twenty seven official national flags since 1777, each change marking new states, with the 50 star version in place since 1960.

When was the American flag first created? Officially in 1777. An American union flag of stripes existed by late 1775. The first Stars and Stripes were sewn shortly after the 1777 resolution.

Why does the American flag have 13 stripes? To honor the 13 original states. Federal law fixed that number in 1818, after a short period when there were 15 stripes.

What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent? Each star stands for one state in the union. New stars appear on the Fourth of July Funny flags for History Lovers following a state's admission.

Why are the colors red, white, and blue used in the American flag? They follow colonial and British heraldic practice. Meanings were later articulated in the 1782 Great Seal description, and those meanings transferred in public understanding to the flag.

What is the meaning behind the American flag colors? Conventionally, red for valor and hardiness, white for purity and innocence, blue for vigilance, perseverance, and justice. Historically, those meanings are linked to the Great Seal, not the 1777 flag law, but the associations are widely accepted.

What was the first American flag called? The Grand Union Flag, or Continental Colors, preceded the Stars and Stripes. The first official national flag under the 1777 resolution is called the Stars and Stripes.

Did Betsy Ross really sew the first flag? She may have sewn early flags, and the five point star cutting method attributed to her is plausible. There is no surviving 1777 era document that proves she made the first official Stars and Stripes. The strongest paper trail for authorship of the design points to Francis Hopkinson.

Why the debate still matters

Every July, people gather under big striped canopies, kids wave small printed flags, and the old arguments return. That is a feature, not a bug, of a democratic symbol. My own view, shaped by time in archives and workshops, is that the flag is both a design and a behavior. It asks who we choose to credit, and it lets us make room for more than one kind of contribution. A man at a desk sketched a pattern, a Congress passed a line or two of law, and a woman at a bench clipped stars from folded cloth, fast because she had orders to fill. The flag belongs to all three, and to the long line of people who added stars as the map filled in.

The next time someone asks you who designed the American flag, you can answer cleanly without deflating the story. Say that Francis Hopkinson left the best evidence of designing the Stars and Stripes for the government in 1777. Say that Betsy Ross and other makers sewed flags for the war effort and helped the five point star become standard. Add that the flag has changed 27 times, that the stripes honor the first 13 states, and that the colors carry meanings Americans have embraced since the 1780s. Then point up at whatever version is flying overhead and notice the part that never changes, the promise that separate lights can make a pattern together.