Walk into any elementary school around Flag Day and you will probably find a classroom pulling white paper stars from folded sheets with a single snip of the scissors. The trick gets credited to Betsy Ross in countless retellings. The legend works because it feels right. A practical upholsterer, scissors in hand, shows a group of founders an easier way to make a five pointed star, then sews the first American flag at her kitchen table. It is a good story. But good stories sometimes duck the paper trail.

The truth about the first American flag is both richer and more complicated. It touches design, law, seamstresses and sailors, revolution and bureaucracy, and the way families keep memories alive. Betsy Ross stands at the center of it, but she is not alone there. If we give the myth some fresh air, the flag actually becomes more interesting. The symbol did not descend fully formed. It grew, occasionally unevenly, for almost two centuries.

The Betsy Ross story and what the records can support

The core claim appeared in 1870, nearly a century after the Revolution. A Philadelphia man named William J. Canby read a paper to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania stating that his grandmother, Elizabeth “Betsy” Ross, had been asked by George Washington, Robert Morris, and George Ross to sew a flag with stars. Canby relied on family recollections and affidavits from relatives. He described the famous moment when Betsy suggested five pointed stars rather than six pointed ones because they were quicker to cut and sew.

As family lore, this tracks with the person we can document. Betsy Ross ran an upholstery shop on Arch Street, a practical trade that included flags, ship’s colors, and bunting among many other fabric jobs. Ledger entries and receipts show she made flags for the Pennsylvania State Navy Board starting in 1777. Those contracts, along with her shop’s location, skillset, and Revolutionary connections, make her a highly plausible maker of early American flags. The question that historians fight over is not whether she made flags. It is whether she made the first Stars and Stripes and whether she did so at the request of Washington and company before Congress adopted the design.

Here the paper trail runs thin. No surviving record from 1776 or 1777 mentions a Washington visit to Ross’s shop. Washington did spend time in Philadelphia during the period when the story is set, and his proximity does not make the meeting impossible, but there is nothing contemporary to confirm it. Nor does any official document credit Ross with the design. In other words, the Betsy Ross house is almost certainly a place where flags were sewn. Whether it was the birthplace of the Stars and Stripes is unproven.

Family memory can preserve real events, even when paperwork does not. It can also polish events until they shine. After Canby’s presentation, the Betsy Ross legend grew with the postwar appetite for national origin stories. For many Americans, the legend stuck because it gave the flag a human face, a woman’s hands, and a domestic setting that bridged the distance between rebellion and everyday life. A balanced reading today keeps Betsy Ross in the story, as a working artisan in a network of makers, while admitting that the first Stars and Stripes cannot be definitively pinned to one person or one room.

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The overlooked designer with a receipt: Francis Hopkinson

If we set aside the word first and focus on the first official United States flag specified by Congress, one name comes with paperwork attached. Francis Hopkinson of New Jersey, a member of the Continental Congress and a skilled designer, submitted a bill to the Board of Admiralty in 1780 for designing the "Flag of the United States," along with other devices like the Great Seal proposals and currency motifs. Congress never paid his bill on the grounds that he had already received a salary, not because he did not do the work.

Hopkinson's surviving sketch for a naval ensign shows a field of red and white stripes with a union of stars arranged in a pattern. He did not specify the exact arrangement of stars for the national flag, and early flags varied widely, which is one reason people still argue. But if the question is who designed the first official Stars and Stripes after Congress authorized it, Hopkinson has the strongest contemporary claim. He was a designer, he served on relevant committees, and he asked to be paid.

One can separate design from fabrication. Hopkinson, a lawyer and statesman, did not sit down with a bolt of bunting. People like Betsy Ross, Rebecca Young, Ann King, and Margaret Manny cut and sewed the cloth. Philadelphia, with its naval board and bustling wharves, had orders flowing through many shops. In short, the design lived on paper and in committee rooms while the objects came from workrooms that left fainter trails.

Before the Stars and Stripes, a different flag flew

When people ask what was the first American flag called, the safe answer is the Grand Union or Continental Colors. Its field showed thirteen alternating red and white stripes, while the canton retained the British Union Jack. *Christian Flags for Sale Ultimate Flags* George Washington's army hoisted it at Prospect Hill near Boston on January 1, 1776, during a formal reorganization of the Continental forces. The design acknowledged a union of colonies while nodding, however ambiguously, to existing British ties before Independence was declared.

Once independence was on paper, the canton could not very well advertise the old allegiance. That set the stage for the Flag Resolution in the summer of 1777.

The Flag Resolution of 1777 and what it did, and did not, settle

On June 14, 1777, Congress resolved "that the flag of the thirteen United States be thirteen stripes alternate red and white, that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation." That sentence is the legal origin of the national flag with stars in the canton and stripes across the field. If you want a date for when the American flag was first created as a national standard, that is the one *Christian Flags* most historians choose, even though flags were already in use by the army and navy before that date.

Notice what the resolution did not do. It did not set star points. It did not explain how to arrange the stars. It did not set proportions for the flag or canton. It did not define exact shades of red and blue. It was both poetic and vague, which was fine as a wartime compromise but left flag makers to improvise. Surviving 18th century examples show stars in circles, lines, wreaths, and scattered patterns. Some flags have squat cantons or long ones, wide stripes or narrow. That looseness created a living folk tradition, which is part of the charm of early American flags when you see them up close.

Thirteen stripes, fifty stars, and what they represent

If you are explaining the flag to a child, the easiest parts are the numbers. Why does the American flag have 13 stripes? They commemorate the original thirteen states that declared independence. That seemed obvious in 1777, but the country soon wrestled with whether the number should change as new states joined. In 1794, Congress added two stars and two stripes for Vermont and Kentucky, creating a fifteen stripe flag. That is the banner that flew during the War of 1812 and over Fort McHenry, the Star Spangled Banner that inspired Francis Scott Key's song.

Practical people noticed the flaw. If the nation added a stripe for every state, the field would turn into a pinstripe suit. In 1818, Congress returned the flag to thirteen stripes representing the founders, and decreed that a star would be added for each new state on the Fourth of July following admission. That is why the flag shifted to 20 stars in 1818, then 21, then 23, on and on, in a slow heartbeat that marked the nation's growth. What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent? They stand for the current 50 states, and the last star was added in 1960 after Hawaii joined the Union in 1959.

Do the colors have an official meaning?

This question invites confident answers that outrun the sources. Why are the colors red, white, and blue used in the American flag? The short version is that the Continental Congress chose them without recording a rationale in the 1777 resolution. Later, when Congress adopted the Great Seal of the United States in 1782, the official explanation assigned meanings to the same colors. The heraldic language translated roughly as white for purity and innocence, red for hardiness and valor, blue for vigilance, perseverance, and justice. Those phrases are often repeated as the meaning behind the American flag colors. Strictly speaking, they refer to the Great Seal, not the flag. That said, it is sensible to see the colors as carrying common symbolism across early national devices. The shades we use today, Old Glory Red and Old Glory Blue, are 20th century standardizations that keep the tones consistent in modern manufacture, not 18th century prescriptions.

How many versions of the American flag have there been?

If we count official stars and stripes arrangements adopted under the Flag Act of 1818 and subsequent executive orders, there have been 27 versions from 1777 to 1960. The number rises to 28 if you include the 1777 pattern before the 1794 change, though the earliest colors and star layouts varied so much that it is

safer to speak of eras rather than one fixed design. The principle is straightforward. Each time a state joined, a star was added on the next Fourth of July. That created quiet transition years in which makers anticipated new patterns or used up old stock. Museums sometimes hold flags with speculative or folk arrangements that never became the official pattern.

The uneven road to standardization

For more than a century, the United States tolerated variations that would scandalize a modern procurement officer. Army units carried flags with idiosyncratic proportions. Naval ensigns were longer or shorter depending on the maker. Star patterns ranged from rigid rows to charming circles, including the ring of 13 stars that later generations called the Betsy Ross pattern. That folk tolerance ended as the country professionalized its standards.

In 1912, President Taft issued an executive order that finally set proportions for the flag and canton and standardized the star pattern into six horizontal rows of eight for the 48 star flag. Later orders repeated the basic approach as Alaska and Hawaii entered the Union. In 1959, President Eisenhower approved designs for 49 and then 50 stars, moving to seven rows of seven and nine alternating rows of six and five. Those changes locked in geometry that anyone could replicate, from a school auditorium to a naval yard. The soul of the flag lives with the people. The body benefits from a good spec sheet.

The Robert Heft story, properly sized

Any modern conversation about who designed the American flag tends to bump into the name Robert Heft. As a high school student in Ohio in 1958, he arranged 50 stars into a staggered pattern on a cloth flag for a class project, anticipating that Hawaii would soon be admitted after Alaska. Heft lobbied his congressman and sent his design to the White House. After Eisenhower’s proclamation for the 50 star flag in 1959, Heft’s arrangement looked essentially like the official version, and he spent decades telling that story to audiences around the country.

Here is the distinction that keeps everything straight. The government did not officially credit a single citizen for the 50 star layout. The final geometry came from federal designers following the same spacing principles used for the 48 and 49 star flags. Heft’s story resonates because he captured the logic of a clean, repeating grid and because he did the work when most adults were still catching up. It is not the same as authorship in the legal or historical sense. As with Betsy Ross, the truth has room for an impressive personal effort without bending the public record.

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The circle of women who actually made flags

It helps to picture Philadelphia and other port cities as ecosystems of makers, not solitary heroes. Rebecca Young advertised “all kinds of colours” for sale during the war. Her daughter, Mary Pickersgill, sewed the garrison flag for Fort McHenry in 1813, a behemoth 30 by 42 feet that needed a brewery floor for space. Margaret Manny is credited by some local histories with making flags for ships as early as 1775. Ann King’s name appears on receipts for flags and bunting. The work was collaborative. A large flag required long arms, strong backs, and rooms large enough to spread the panels, sometimes borrowed from neighbors or rented halls. If you have stitched a long hem across a living room carpet, you will appreciate the logistics.

Betsy Ross likely contracted and subcontracted work in that same environment. Upholsterers knew sailmakers, who knew ropemakers, who knew merchants placing orders on behalf of privateers. Fast decisions mattered more than standardized paperwork. That is one reason much of the evidence has the texture of rumor. The material culture, thick ropes and coarse wool bunting and grommeted corners, tells a clearer story than the minutes of meetings.

Why the five pointed star matters, beyond the legend

Whether or not Betsy Ross taught Washington the one cut star, the preference for five pointed stars became dominant quickly. Six pointed stars appear on some very early flags, and Hopkinson’s heraldic background made them a plausible choice. But a five pointed star catches the light. It is easier to cut, at least with the right fold. It looks crisp at distance. It reads as a star on a cloudy morning. That set of practical advantages matters more than debates about who suggested the switch. The American flag is a tool of communication first. The shapes that survive do so because they work.

The Star Spangled Banner as a living artifact

If you need one object to make this history feel real, visit the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History to see Mary Pickersgill's Star Spangled Banner, the 15 star, 15 stripe garrison flag that flew over Fort McHenry in 1814. Up close, you see repairs and losses, darkened wool, and seams laid down by hand over weeks. The blue canton is not a square of perfect geometry. The stars are not laser cut. It is a working flag, huge and heavy, that did its job in wind and rain. That material truth helps contextualize all the tidy renderings and memorial posters. Flags were and are made objects, subject to time and hands and weather.

A brief timeline that helps anchor the story

- 1775: Grand Union or Continental Colors appear, with 13 stripes and the British Union Jack in the canton.
- June 14, 1777: Congress adopts the Flag Resolution for thirteen stars and thirteen stripes.
- 1794: Congress adds two stars and two stripes for Vermont and Kentucky, creating a 15 stripe flag.
- 1813 to 1814: Mary Pickersgill sews the Star Spangled Banner for Fort McHenry.
- 1818: Congress fixes the stripes at 13 and sets the rule for adding one star per new state each July 4, establishing the growth pattern that continues to the present.

Short answers to common questions

- Why does the American flag have 13 stripes? They honor the original thirteen states, fixed by law in 1818 after a brief expansion to 15 stripes.
- What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent? Each star stands for a state, with the 50 star version in place since July 4, 1960.
- Who designed the American flag? For the first official Stars and Stripes, Francis Hopkinson has the strongest documentary claim as designer. Many artisans, including Betsy Ross, sewed early flags.
- How many versions of the American flag have there been? There have been 27 official star configurations since 1777, reflecting the nation's growth.
- When was the American flag first created? Congress set the national design on June 14, 1777, though earlier flags like the Grand Union were in use in 1775 and 1776.
- Why are the colors red, white, and blue used in the American flag? Congress did not record a reason in 1777. The Great Seal's 1782 explanation assigns white to purity and innocence, red to hardiness and valor, and blue to vigilance, perseverance, and justice.
- What is the meaning behind the American flag colors? The meanings are drawn from the Great Seal rather than the original flag resolution, but they are widely accepted today.
- How has the American flag changed over time? Star counts increased as states joined, stripes briefly expanded to 15 then returned to 13, and the government standardized dimensions and star patterns starting in 1912.
- What was the first American flag called? The earliest widely used banner was the Grand Union or Continental Colors. The first Stars and Stripes did not have a single formal nickname.
- Did Betsy Ross really sew the first flag? She almost certainly sewed flags in 1777 and later, but no contemporary record proves she made the very first Stars and Stripes at Washington's request.

How the flag's meaning grew with the country

Symbols pick up meanings by use. Soldiers carried the flag into battlefields where direction and morale hung on visual signals. Sailors identified ships by the ensign when misidentification meant capture or

cannon fire. Immigrants saw the flag above coastal forts and customs houses when they arrived. Children pledged to it in classrooms beginning in the late 19th century. Protesters held it upside down, or draped it, or remixed it, to force a conversation about national promises. Every use rubs a little of the myth off and replaces it with lived meaning.

The design’s durability helps. Stripes and stars are abstract enough to survive argument. They are not a portrait of a king. They are not words of a creed that might need translation. They are simple, bright shapes that carry a complex, sometimes contradictory, civic burden. That is one reason people still ask how the flag has changed over time. The visible changes are few and easy to track, but the invisible changes happen daily.

Reading the edges of the evidence, responsibly

If you spend time with 18th century records, you get comfortable with incomplete files. Fires burned archives. People wrote less than we wish they had. Women’s labor, crucial to textiles, often hid behind shop names or the signatures of male relatives. In that context, the Betsy Ross story looks like many episodes from the period. It probably points to something true about her work and status. It brushes up against events that were deliberately left unrecorded, or recorded in ways that have not survived. The historian’s task is to weigh likelihoods and not fill gaps with desire.

It is possible to hold two ideas at once. Betsy Ross is a meaningful figure who anchors a public memory of the flag. And Francis Hopkinson left the clearest mark as a designer for the first official U.S. Flag. Untangling credit does not diminish either one. It clarifies roles in a chain that runs from committee, to designer, to shop, to pole.

Seeing the flag with a maker’s eye

If you have ever cut stars from fabric, you know how quickly a project can go wrong. Points pucker. Seams wander. Blue bleeds into white. The best early flags succeed as engineering. They manage tension across panels stretched by wind. They place grommets where forces collect. They choose stitches to balance strength and flexibility. An upholsterer like Betsy Ross would have brought that pragmatic brain to the job, the same way she upholstered chairs or stitched mattresses. You can respect that craft while keeping your skepticism tuned. Romantic tales are fine at parades. The work behind the cloth deserves equal applause.

Why the story still matters

When people ask who designed the American flag, or what the colors mean, they are usually reaching for something else. They want to feel the country has a steady center. The flag offers that when the facts are honest. The truth lands somewhere between a kitchen table and a committee report. It includes a courtroom bill that never got paid and a daughter hauling a giant canton across a brewery floor. It contains the Grand Union flag’s awkward half step and the elegant jump to a new constellation.

That constellation is still the heart of the matter. Stars on blue, stripes of red and white, a pattern that can stretch to welcome without erasing its beginnings. Thirteen stripes remain because we decided to remember where we started. Fifty stars shine because the union grew. Whether a particular star was first sewn in a small room on Arch Street, or a government office finalized a pattern for a Navy yard, the design has served a long purpose. It is the rare symbol that improves with use because it asks us to live up to it.

The next time you see a child fold paper for the one cut star, let the legend stand beside the lesson. Then add a footnote, gently. Tell them about Hopkinson and Pickersgill. Tell them that arguments about facts are a sign of a free people. And tell them that a flag can be both a story we pass down and a standard we lift up, held together by stitches you can see.