

Flag Day: History, Symbolism, Tradition, and Cultural Significance

By

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Flag Day in the United States serves as a symbolic focal point for reflecting on the nation's evolving identity, its ideals, and the historical experiences that shaped the American story. While the holiday commemorates the adoption of the national flag by the Continental Congress on June 14, 1777, its meaning stretches far beyond a single legislative act. The observance represents the convergence of historical memory, patriotic ritual, civic education, and cultural symbolism that have developed slowly over centuries. Although Flag Day is not a federal holiday requiring business closures, it remains deeply woven into the national fabric as an annual reminder of the values associated with the American experiment. To understand the holiday's significance, it is essential to examine the symbolism of the flag, the long and sometimes contested history of its design, the individuals and organizations who shaped the Flag Day movement, and the broader cultural practices such as military funerals and space exploration that have cemented the flag's place in American consciousness.

The symbolism of the American flag, though not explicitly defined in the original congressional resolution, has acquired profound meaning over time. The thirteen horizontal stripes honor the original colonies that declared independence, while the stars in the blue canton have always represented the United States first thirteen, now fifty. The constellation of stars emphasizes unity within diversity, encapsulating the idea of separate political entities joined under a single national purpose. Over the years, Americans have assigned deeper symbolic meanings to the colors, drawing from heraldic traditions and interpretations later formalized through association with the Great Seal. Red came to be linked with valor and sacrifice; white with purity of intention and honesty of purpose; and blue with vigilance, perseverance, and justice. These meanings, while partly retrospective, resonate strongly with how Americans have understood national identity, especially through war, crisis, and civic transformation. The flag thus represents far more than a patterned design; it is a symbol layered with emotional, historical, and aspirational significance.

The origins of the American flag reach back to the Revolutionary era, when the fledgling nation sought symbols that could distinguish it from the British Empire and unify disparate colonies. Prior to 1777, several unofficial banners circulated, including the Grand Union Flag featuring the British Union Jack in the canton and thirteen red and white

stripes reflecting the ambiguous political situation early in the war when many still hoped for reconciliation. The decision in June 1777 to create a flag excluding British symbolism was therefore a decisive political act. Yet even after its adoption, the flag's appearance remained fluid for decades. Variations in star arrangement, proportions, and even the shade of blue were common, as the resolution lacked specific design instructions. These inconsistencies highlight the organic nature of the flag's development. It was not an instant national icon, but an evolving emblem shaped by usage, necessity, and public imagination. Only through time, conflict, and national growth did the flag attain the powerful symbolic presence it holds today.

The story of Flag Day emerges from the efforts of citizens and educators who believed that national unity required shared rituals and symbols. Among them, Bernard J. Cigrand is most frequently recognized as the central figure. On June 14, 1885, Cigrand organized a ceremony with his students at Stony Hill School in Wisconsin, marking the anniversary of the 1777 Flag Resolution. He saw the flag not merely as decoration but as a civic teaching tool capable of instilling democratic values and national cohesion. Over the following decades, Cigrand traveled widely, wrote extensively, and engaged with national patriotic societies to advocate for formalized Flag Day. His commitment earned him a place in American civic memory, though he was not alone in the cause.

Many others helped shape the Flag Day tradition. George Morris Bolch, a New York school administrator, held his own celebration in 1889, involving hundreds of children in what became one of the earliest large-scale urban school observances. By linking the flag to public education, Bolch contributed significantly to the holiday's institutional footing. Elizabeth "Bessie" Griswold Hinson of Illinois likewise organized school ceremonies, publishing educational material that reached national readerships and inspired classroom observances throughout the Midwest. William T. Kerr of Pennsylvania emerged as another key figure. As president of the American Flag Day Association for decades, Kerr used his political connections to press for federal recognition, highlighting the need for a standardized national observance. Meanwhile, George T. Gillespie in Connecticut organized widespread community events that demonstrated the holiday's growing popularity, particularly in New England.

The story of Betsy Ross as the maker of the first American flag occupies a unique place in the intersection of national mythology, gendered memory, and the politics of historical narrative. The tale as most Americans know it did not enter public consciousness until nearly a century after the Revolution, when Ross's grandson, William J. Canby, presented a paper to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1870 asserting that his grandmother had sewn the first flag at the request of George Washington in June 1776.

According to Canby's account, Washington, accompanied by Robert Morris and George Ross, visited Betsy's upholstery shop to commission the flag and approved her suggestion that the stars be arranged in a circle and cut with five points instead of six. No contemporary documentation survives to corroborate this story no letters, congressional records, receipts, or military orders referencing such a meeting exist but the narrative relies heavily on oral family testimony and the historical plausibility that Ross, known to have made flags and naval standards for Pennsylvania's revolutionary government, may have been involved in early flag production. Scholars have noted that she did indeed work on military banners, and multiple receipts confirm that she produced ship colors for Pennsylvania's State Navy Board during the war. Thus, while the specifics of the "first flag" story cannot be conclusively verified, the broader context of her professional life places her firmly within the artisan networks that manufactured revolutionary symbols. In this sense, Ross's significance may lie not in being the sole originator of the first national flag but in representing the skilled women whose labor materially contributed to the Revolution in ways often omitted from the official record.

Yet the power of the Betsy Ross legend extends far beyond evidentiary debates because it entered American culture at a moment when the nation was actively searching for unifying symbols. The late nineteenth century especially during the Centennial era of 1876 produced a surge in patriotic commemoration as the United States, recovering from the divisions of the Civil War, sought narratives that emphasized shared heritage and national continuity. The Ross story appealed precisely because it was accessible, domestic, and reassuring: it framed the origin of the national flag not as an institutional decree but as a moment of handcraft in a modest Philadelphia workshop, symbolizing the unity of ordinary citizens in the cause of liberty. Civic groups, women's organizations, school textbook writers, and patriotic societies enthusiastically embraced the story, elevating Ross to the status of a national folk hero. Paintings such as Charles H. Weisgerber's famous 1893 depiction of Ross presenting the flag to Washington further cemented the imagery, while the acquisition of the Betsy Ross House as a historic site in 1898 transformed the narrative into an institutionalized component of public history. Over time, the Ross legend became intertwined with the emergence of Flag Day itself: early Flag Day advocates like Bernard Cigrand and George Bolch invoked the Ross story to reinforce the emotional and symbolic power of the flag as a democratic artifact born from the labor of an ordinary American woman. Modern scholars continue to debate the veracity of the Ross claim, offering alternative possibilities such as Rebecca Young or Margaret Manny other Philadelphia women documented as makers of early flags but they simultaneously acknowledge that myths often reveal historical truths of a different kind. The endurance of the Ross narrative underscores the American desire for national symbols rooted in

craftsmanship, patriotism, and familial continuity, illustrating how stories whether fully documented or not shape the cultural meaning of the flag and the rituals that surround its commemoration.

Equally important were the contributions of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, which in 1907 officially adopted Flag Day as a required annual rite for all lodges. The Elks' strong national presence helped institutionalize public ceremonies, reinforcing the idea that the flag represented shared history and civic duty. Their commitment to ritualized observance created a template later used by schools, veterans' organizations, and civic groups across the country. These parallel efforts illustrate how Flag Day arose from the convergence of grassroots activism, civic organization, and educational initiative rather than from top-down government action.

Federal recognition came gradually. In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson, responding to growing public observances and wartime demands for national unity, issued a proclamation establishing June 14 as Flag Day. Wilson's words connected the flag to the broader struggle of World War I and the ideals the United States sought to defend. Yet the observance remained voluntary, lacking congressional authority. Only after World War II, in 1949, did President Harry S. Truman sign the act of Congress making Flag Day a permanent national observance. Truman, a veteran himself, emphasized the flag's connection to sacrifice, democratic perseverance, and collective memory. The holiday, however, was not designated a federal public holiday with closures, reflecting the American tendency to reserve official days off for only the most widely recognized civic commemorations. Still, the annual presidential proclamation required by law ensures continual reaffirmation of the flag's significance.

State-level recognition of Flag Day varies widely. Pennsylvania stands alone as the only state to make it a legal holiday. Others such as Wisconsin, New York, Illinois, and Connecticut issue periodic gubernatorial proclamations, though these are ceremonial rather than statutory. In California, governors have occasionally issued proclamations recognizing Flag Day, but the state does not mark the day as an official holiday.

To fully appreciate the significance of Flag Day, it is essential to explore the broader cultural practices tied to the flag, particularly those that evoke reverence and solemnity. One of the most powerful of these is the tradition of draping a flag over the coffin of a military service member or national leader. Although Americans often associate this custom with their own armed forces, its origins extend back to the Napoleonic Wars in the early nineteenth century. European armies used national banners to honor fallen officers and soldiers, linking the death of the individual with the survival and values of the nation. As the United States developed its own military identity, it adopted similar funeral

traditions. By the Civil War, flag-draped coffins had become a familiar symbol of sacrifice. Abraham Lincoln's funeral procession, with the flag covering his remains, embedded the ritual deeply in American memory. Over time, the practice expanded to include veterans, public officials, and individuals whose service embodied national ideals. The ceremony's solemnity lies in its symbolism: the flag honors the deceased while affirming the continuity of the nation they served. The tradition remains one of the most moving ways in which the flag expresses both grief and gratitude.

The American flag also symbolizes national achievement, exploration, and technological advancement. The most iconic example is the 1969 Apollo 11 Moon landing, when astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin planted the U.S. flag on the lunar surface. This act signified not territorial conquest but scientific triumph, democratic competition during the Cold War, and the nation's capacity to push the boundaries of human possibility. The image of the flag on the Moon became a global visual shorthand for American innovation and perseverance. Though the flags left on the Moon are now bleached by solar radiation, their presence represents one of the most dramatic extensions of American symbolism beyond Earth.

The flag's presence in American education is another significant aspect of its cultural role. From the late nineteenth to the twentieth century, schools became the primary venue for patriotic rituals, including daily flag-raising ceremonies and recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. Early Flag Day advocates understood the importance of civic instruction, particularly during periods of mass immigration when many Americans feared the erosion of shared national identity. Flag Day events in schools emphasized unity, democratic values, and constitutional principles. Teachers like Cigrand, Hinson, and Bolch helped embed the flag into the American educational experience, influencing generations of students. Although debates continue about the place of patriotic exercises in public education, the flag remains a central symbol in school ceremonies, graduations, and community events.

Flag Day also cannot be understood without recognizing the cultural resonance of Francis Scott Key's "The Star-Spangled Banner," written during the War of 1812 when Key witnessed the bombardment of Fort McHenry. His awe at seeing the flag still waving the next morning expressed a powerful sense of national endurance. Although the poem did not become the national anthem until 1931, it profoundly shaped early flag celebrations and contributed to the emotional meaning attached to the symbol. The anthem's prominence during Flag Day observances, military ceremonies, and sporting events reinforces the connection between the flag and collective identity.

Throughout American history, the flag has served various roles during times of crisis. During the Civil War, it symbolized the Union cause and the hope of national reunification. During both World Wars, it became a rallying emblem for freedom and democratic purpose. During the Cold War, it represented ideological contrast with communist regimes, appearing prominently in public schools, civic rallies, and international diplomacy. After the September 11 attacks, the flag became a spontaneous national symbol of grief and resilience. Americans displayed flags across homes, vehicles, businesses, and public spaces in one of the largest symbolic mobilizations in American history. These moments illustrate the power of the flag to unify, comfort, and mobilize a nation during its most challenging periods.

In modern times, the meaning of Flag Day continues to evolve. The holiday encourages Americans to revisit the ideals of liberty, equality, and democratic engagement that the flag symbolizes. While the flag remains a unifying emblem for many, it has also been the subject of political debates, legal cases, and cultural discourse. Issues surrounding free expression including Supreme Court decisions on flag burning have sparked intense discussion about patriotism, dissent, and constitutional rights. These debates underscore the flag's complexity as both a revered national symbol and a vessel for competing interpretations of American identity. Flag Day, by highlighting the flag's history and symbolism, provides an opportunity for reflection on these tensions and the ongoing project of fulfilling the nation's foundational ideals.

The evolving design of the American flag also contributes to its significance. Each addition of a star marks a historical moment of national growth. The current fifty-star design, adopted in 1960 after Hawaii's statehood, has lasted longer than any previous version. Yet discussions of potential new states, such as Washington, D.C. or Puerto Rico, remind Americans that the flag remains a living symbol capable of future transformation. Its adaptability reflects the nation's capacity for change while maintaining continuity with its founding principles.

Respect for the flag is codified in the U.S. Flag Code, adopted in 1942. Although the Code is advisory rather than punitive, it provides guidelines for displaying, managing, and retiring the flag. These practices emphasize respect for the symbol and reinforce its role in civic life. Organizations like the Elks, the American Legion, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars continue to educate the public about proper etiquette and conduct retirement ceremonies that honor the flag's symbolic dignity. These traditions further embed the flag in American ritual life.

In communities across the nation including those without formal Flag Day proclamations the holiday is observed through civic ceremonies, veterans'

commemorations, flag-raising rituals, and public events. The absence of an official municipal or county declaration in places like Gilroy does not diminish the holiday's cultural presence. Instead, it underscores the distributed nature of American patriotism, where local traditions, national symbolism, and individual expressions all contribute to the flag's meaning. Flag Day thus operates both as a formal national observance and as a diffuse cultural practice grounded in community life.

Ultimately, Flag Day represents far more than the anniversary of an eighteenth-century resolution. It encapsulates the nation's evolving understanding of itself, its struggles, triumphs, sacrifices, and aspirations. The flag's endurance reflects the endurance of the American people, who have continually reinterpreted its symbolism to meet the changing demands of history. Whether displayed in moments of celebration, mourning, conflict, or exploration, the flag stands as a reminder of the ideals that bind the nation together. Flag Day invites Americans not only to honor the emblem but also to reflect on the principles it represents, and the ongoing effort required to uphold them. Through its history, its symbolism, and its cultural influence, the American flag remains one of the country's most enduring and meaningful national icons.