

# FLAG DAY: A Uniquely American Tradition

June 14th was officially designated as Flag Day and became part of our national heritage in 1918. However, the idea of designating a special day to pay homage to the flag of the United States is much older, and is as uniquely American as the "stars and stripes" we salute. The date of June 14th was selected to commemorate that date in 1777 when the U.S. Continental Congress met in Philadelphia and passed a resolution stating "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." This resolution identified the basic flag design elements, but the actual design of the U.S. flag evolved along with the history of the nation it represents. Many of the early U.S. flag designs involved no stripes. They consisted of various symbols and mottoes and represented important historical events during our nation's development in the Revolutionary War era. Some of this era's early flags had symbols such as the pine tree on the famous New England flag carried at the battle of Bunker Hill in 1775. Probably the best known flag symbol from that period is from the flag of the first commander of the U.S. Navy. The symbol is the rattlesnake with its ominous warning of 'Don't Tread On Me.'

## **Stripes Begin To Play A Significant Role In Flag Design**

During the Revolutionary War era, the mere presence of stripes as a symbol was far more important than the color, number or arrangement of the stripes. The **Grand Union** flag was one of the early flag designs of that time to incorporate stripes. Also known as 'The Continental Colors', it was created by superimposing six white stripes on the British red ensign. The Grand Union flag has been recognized as our first national flag. The stripe's presence on the traditional British design rankled the British and they referred to them as "those rebellious stripes". The oldest surviving example of a flag with red and white stripes and white stars on a blue field is the Bennington Flag, carried by the Vermont Militia at the Battle of Bennington in 1777. This flag is considered to be the first example of the "Stars and Stripes" to lead American armed forces on land. Despite the legend rooted in American folklore, no historical evidence supports the claim that Betsy Ross played any significant role in the first **Stars and Stripes** design. In fact, such a claim never appeared until 1870, when it was championed by a grandson of Mrs. Ross.

On March 4, 1791, Vermont was admitted as a new state. Kentucky followed in 1792. For the first time, our young nation was faced with how to represent new states on the flag. Following a great debate in Congress, President George Washington approved the Flag Law of 1794 stipulating that "the flag of the United States be fifteen stripes, alternate red and white, and that the union be fifteen stars, white on a blue field." This was the 'Star Spangled Banner' which Francis Scott Key saw flying over Fort McHenry "by dawn's early light." The flag of 15 stars and stripes soon became outdated. Indiana was admitted to the Union in 1816, and became the fourth new state to be admitted since the 1794 Flag Law. While new states were not nationally recognized, it was customary for individuals to add a star and stripe to their personal flags as new states were admitted. A proliferation of different designs which did little to represent a unified nation resulted. Obviously, the United States needed a national flag design to accommodate the growing democracy. In 1818, a new flag law fixed the flag at 13 horizontal red and white stripes. The law made provisions for the addition of a star on July fourth following the admission of each new state. This was the first time that the stripes were specified to be horizontal. However, it wasn't until almost a hundred years later that the U.S. flag was truly standardized. The Flag Law of 1912 established relative proportions for the entire flag, specified the position, size and arrangement of the stars, and mandated that each star have one point upward.

## **National Movement to Establish "Flag Day"**

Congress passed a resolution urging that the flag be flown from all public buildings on June 14, 1877, the centennial of the establishment of the **Stars and Stripes** as the official flag of the United States. This resolution created renewed interest in honoring the flag and began a national movement to establish June 14th as Flag Day. In 1888, Bernard J. Cigrand, a Wisconsin school teacher, had his pupils observe June 14th as Flag Day. Cigrand followed this effort by speaking and writing on behalf of a national observance. He is generally considered to be the Father of Flag Day. By 1895, a number of patriotic organizations took up the cause. The first edition of the Boy Scout Handbook was published in 1911, and the Chapter on Patriotism and Citizenship stated that Flag Day was a holiday in several states. In 1918, June 14th was officially proclaimed to be Flag Day by President Woodrow Wilson.

## **National Ban on Commercial Use of the Flag**

While the 1877 centennial focused much renewed attention on the flag, not all of this attention grew out of a spirit of patriotism. The late 19th century saw widespread use of the flag for political and commercial advertising purposes. In 1897, South Dakota was the first state to pass a law prohibiting such usage. Other state laws followed, raising strong objections from commercial interests. When a Nebraska brewer was prohibited from marketing beer with a flag on the label, he appealed the state law constitutionality up to the Supreme Court. In a landmark decision, the court upheld the state law, stating that the use of the flag for purposes of trade and traffic was "wholly foreign to that for which it was provided by the Nation."

## **Flag Etiquette is Established**

This court decision opened the door to a national ban on commercial use of the flag. In 1905, Congress passed a law, prohibiting the registration of any trademark consisting of "the flag, or coat of arms or other insignia of the United States, or any simulation thereof." This reverence for the flag was further advanced in 1924 when a formal code of flag etiquette was finalized, though this code did not become law until 1942. The United States was the first nation to establish a Flag Day, to have a Pledge of Allegiance and to establish a flag code. Whether we call it the Stars and Stripes, the Star Spangled Banner, Old Glory, or simply The Flag, it remains the symbol that "so proudly we hail."