

THE EVOLUTION OF THE DESIGN OF THE AMERICAN NATIONAL FLAG

FROM 1767 - 1912, AS IT RELATES TO COLLECTING ANTIQUE EXAMPLES

by Jeff R. Bridgman



The largest of all known Lincoln Campaign Portrait Flags; one-of-A-kind among known examples, ca 1860. Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.

People are often surprised to learn that before 1912, lack of a specific design for the American national flag left a great deal open to interpretation and imagination. Given the level of respect our flag demands today, it is difficult to conceive that for the first 135 years of its existence, the star pattern was left up to the whims of its maker. The same was true of the number of points on the stars, not to mention all aspects of the flag's proportions and the selected shades of red and blue.

Circular star patterns were a favorite in the period between the Civil War (1861-65) and the 1876 anniversary of our nation's independence. Occasionally the stars formed one large star, termed the Great Star or sometimes the Great Flower pattern. Then there are rarer patterns still. Among these

are circles within squares, pentagons, ovals, and completely random patterns. There are diamonds, shields, snowflakes, and starbursts. In rare instances, the stars even formed letters and numbers to spell words and dates, such as a "U" for "Union" or "1776-1876." All manner of arrangements in rows and columns are encountered, but the stars tipped this way and that and seldom did they all point upward.

Given the liberties Americans were afforded in flag design, it is not so difficult to understand why a tasteful degree of text and graphics was almost as permissible as the stripes and stars themselves. American presidential candidates began using the red, white, and blue as a medium for printed campaign advertising as early as 1840. The first on record were made for William Henry Harrison, who

served the shortest term ever as our commander-in-chief. Though he contracted pneumonia at his inaugural speech and died just 30 days later, this beloved American figure unknowingly left behind some of the most extraordinary American flags known to exist. Thus began a sixty-five-year term in American history, during which it was perfectly acceptable for seekers of American political office to place their names, faces, and platform slogans on the much-loved symbol of our nation.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, there was a growing shift in public opinion to uphold the Stars & Stripes as a sacred object, worthy of the most scrupulous ethics regarding its use and display. Attempts were made to ban the use of the flag for advertising in 1890 and 1895, but it was not until the year 1905 that Congress finally decreed that the use of text or portraits on official insignia of the United States would afterwards be outlawed. Some traditions die hard, however, and this did not entirely eliminate it. As a fellow flag scholar once memorably put it, “there were no flag police.” Later examples survive, probably made without the respective candidates’ consent, but the turn of the new century generally marked the end of an era where politicians sought to woo their constituency with bold and whimsical versions of Old Glory.

In 1912, key specifications of the flag, formerly absent, were finally standardized through an Executive Order of President Howard Taft. As was the case with political flags, not all of the examples made after that year conformed to the desired intentions. A few great ones with visual complexity, text, and other interesting variations were yet to come, but that year marked a sharp juncture, at which point the flurry of interesting features that had previously frequented American flag design, effectively disappeared. It is the intent of this article to chronicle the history of our flag, focusing on design features and lesser known facts, as they relate to the sort of attributes that excite collectors of antique flags.

Colonial America & The Onset of War

The story of our flag’s design begins around 1765, with the birth of the Sons of Liberty in Boston, Massachusetts. This famed group of colonial patriots included men such as John Hancock, Sam Adams, and Paul Revere. In response to the Stamp Act and its “taxation without representation,” the organization sought to rally support against British tyranny.

It is generally agreed that in 1767, the Sons of Liberty adopted a flag with 9 vertical red and white stripes. The selection of this particular count glorifies the number of colonies that opposed the Stamp Act. Hung beneath Liberty Trees (gathering points for open air meetings)



(Figure 1)
Example of the first national flag of America, the “Grand Union,” made by Horstmann Bros. & Co. of Philadelphia for the 1876 Centennial International Exhibition.
Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.

and often displayed with Liberty Poles, flags in this design were employed by the organization in their work toward independence. While other types of flags are thought to have also been displayed, among them an all-red flag bearing the word “Liberty,” the red and white striped version is most important to this discussion because it represents the advent of this feature in Colonial American imagery.

Not long after, two other symbols entered the American landscape. Around 1775, some merchant ships could be seen flying flags with 13 horizontal red and white stripes, to represent all of the colonies. These have likewise been tied to the Sons of Liberty.

At about the same time, other flags began to appear that married the British Union Flag (a.k.a., the Union Jack) to the 13 stripes—sometimes in red, white, and blue instead of merely red and white. The “Grand Union” is the most commonly used name for these signals, which together, presuming an array of differences often expected of the 18th century, comprise what most flag historians consider to be the first American national design. This was the flag that was thought to have been in use in the opening years of the Revolutionary War, between 1775 and 1777, under the Second Continental Congress (fig. 1). The use of heraldry was consistent with other outposts of the British Empire, which employed the Union Flag image in the canton, accompanied by a field that somehow reflected the particular dominion or territory. Often this meant a solid red, blue, or white field, adorned with the seal of the respective state. In the case of the flag representing America, there were no such arms on a solid ground, but instead 13 stripes to signify the 13 colonies.

The Grand Union went by many names. 19th-century flag historians seem to have preferred the term “Continental Grand Union,” but this language is not found in 18th-century documents or literature. In the period, it was simply referred to as the “Continental” or “Union” flag. In the 21st century, some flag experts prefer the term “Continental Colors,” of which this was certainly one and, in a modern context, what is thought to be the most important one, but critics argue that the term is simply too generic.

Some historians have cited that the first record of the use of the Grand Union as a national ensign can be found in an illustration of Philadelphia from the Delaware River by George Heap, published by British engraver Gerald van der Gucht in 1754 (fig. 2). Vexillologist Peter Ansoff cleverly discovered, however, that van der Gucht had simply copied the ships from an older engraving that he executed of Mumbai Harbor in Bombay, India. At least one ship in that scene is believed to have belonged to the East India Company, whose private merchant ensign happens to share the same graphics as the Grand Union. Because the East India Company traded with America, some historians have suggested that the design of the flag was an inspiration for the Stars & Stripes. Whatever the case may be, after close examination of the Philadelphia engraving, I discovered that the illustrations show numerous flags that appear at first glance to have striped fields, but in reality the stripes are merely shading, applied on almost every surface to show contrast. The flags are probably British Red Ensigns.

The first documented appearance of the Grand Union design as colonial American colors, occurred in Philadelphia on December 3rd, 1775, when it was raised by First Lieutenant John Paul Jones over the Continental Navy’s first flagship, “Alfred.” This act was recorded in letters to Congress. Identification of continental ships was the reason that a new flag would soon be adopted, removing British symbolism, for sustained use in the war and beyond.

Unlike the Navy, American ground forces did not customarily carry a national flag until much later. In his book *Standards and Colors of the American Revolution* (1982, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia), author Edward Richardson states the following: “When the fighting began in 1775, and militia units from the

various colonies joined together in besieging the British garrison at Boston, the Continental Congress voted to take all such troops into the services of the United Provinces of North America and appointed Washington as their Commander in Chief. There was no United Colonies flag at the time.”

This appears to have soon changed. In a January 4th, 1776 letter addressed to Congressional Delegate Joseph Reed of Pennsylvania, Washington reported for the first time that he “hoisted the Union flag in compliment to the United Colonies.” This had occurred on January 1st, 1776, at Cambridge. While some flag historians have argued that he was actually describing a British Red Ensign, Washington’s words seem to suggest otherwise. Further, since the Red Ensign was often displayed by the British Army, bearing no American symbolism, the Grand Union was a far better representation of the colonies, as well as a better signal to differentiate the opposing armies.

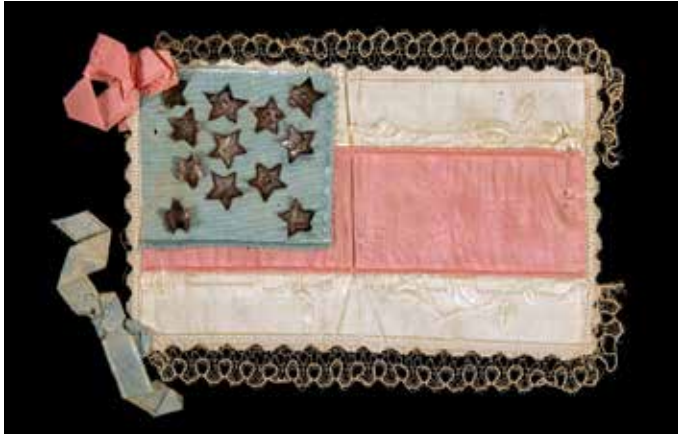
Richardson confirms that “The Continental Union [flag] was a natural selection for the Americans in 1775. It did not signify rebellion but rather continued loyalty to the mother country.” Not all Americans were ready to abandon family heritage and tradition. The same thing would occur almost 100 years later, during the American Civil War, when Southerners were loathe to abandon the Stars & Stripes. After all, it was their flag too and, in many cases, had been so for a very long time. For this reason, variations of it were sometimes produced in the South, near the beginning of the war, which augmented the star and/or stripe count to represent the Confederacy. In addition, the first official flag of the Confederacy looked a great deal like the Stars & Stripes—so much so, in fact, that it had to be altered to reduce the risk of confusion on the battlefield (fig. 3).

A New Constellation

If you query any given educated person as to the date upon which the Stars & Stripes officially replaced the Grand Union, a knee-jerk response might be July 4th, 1776. That was my initial guess, back when I didn’t know the answer. Sadly, I was already in the antiques business at the time and had been a collector of many things since childhood. I had also been on more battlefield tours as a child than I can clearly remember. For these reasons I was embarrassed to discover that I had never actually considered the question and, while I had naturally heard of Flag Day, I had never made the connection that in retrospect seems painfully obvious. I was certain that most people could not explain what Flag Day was, let alone recall the day and month it took place. Like many Americans, I had simply taken for granted that the flag must have arrived with the signing



(Figure 2) Philadelphia from the Delaware River by George Heap, published by British engraver Gerald van der Gucht in 1754. Photo courtesy Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



(Figure 3)
Confederate Bible Flag in the 1st National format (a.k.a., Stars & Bars), captured by Major Frederick Green Stiles of the 42nd Massachusetts at the “Battle of the Hankerchiefs” in New Orleans. Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.

of the Declaration, or perhaps shortly beforehand, and was somehow raised for the first time with the advent of Independence. That auspicious occasion wouldn’t actually take place, however, until almost a year later, on June 14th, 1777. This is the day that we now celebrate, acknowledging the official birthday of the American flag.

Even after the new flag was accepted, evidence suggests that the Grand Union design persisted. This may have been because information traveled slowly, or because there was little immediate need to alter the flags already being used, or for the more practical reason that materials and skilled labor were not readily available to sew new flags. Garrison flags, for example, were difficult to manufacture. Averaging between 35 and 45 feet on the fly, the undertaking to produce such a mammoth textile was both costly and laborious. The task would have required a team of accomplished seamstresses, plus access to sufficient stock of British or German-made wool bunting, and perhaps 1,000 feet of thread. Consider for a moment how the availability of shoes, clothing, and ammunition were a huge problem for Washington’s troops at Valley Forge. When faced with the choice of using scarce funds to properly cloth his men and give them bullets, versus the replacement of a garrison flag that was already distinguishable as American, the decision was probably an easy one.

The information thus far disclosed covers but a small number of check marks on a long list of poorly understood facts concerning the origin of the American flag. Sadly, very little about the flag’s development over time is touched upon today in history classes at the elementary, high school, or college levels. When it was discussed with greater frequency in years past, some of the most basic information put forth by textbooks and instructors was false. One of the most glaring holes could be found in the simplest of questions: Who was

responsible for the design and what did it look like? Both of these topics have been drowned in myth so often and for so long as to achieve legend. For more than a century, children dressed up as Betsy Ross. Her perfect circle of 5-pointed stars has been displayed on nearly countless flags and banners, in hundreds or perhaps thousands of movies, in books, television programs and newspapers, on clothing, trinkets and media of all kinds.

What the history books should have said, given current knowledge, is that Betsy Ross may have made the first flag, but that she did not design it and the stars were probably not in a circle. Accepted on June 14th, 1777, the resolution of the Second Continental Congress that created the new flag read as follows: “Resolved, That the flag of the United States be made of thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new Constellation.”

Because no specification of the pattern was given, we have no certainty of how the stars were configured, or even if there was an expected way. So what did the first 13 star flag look like? Believe it or not, no one is sure. Eighteenth-century images survive on powder horns, paintings, drawings, and engravings, as well as a tiny handful of actual flags, but the very first one is not known. Flag historians generally agree that the individual who played the primary role in its design was one of our founding fathers, Francis Hopkinson, a native Philadelphian, delegate to the Continental Congress representing New Jersey, and signer of the Declaration of Independence. Hopkinson was a member of the Continental Navy Board in 1776. Because the number of available hands was so small, along with available funds, people sometimes wore several hats. As an amateur artist with an interest in heraldry, Hopkinson designed a variety of government-related artwork. His skill in this regard, plus his function with the Navy, brought to bear his role in the design of a new signal to identify Continental ships on the open seas. This was the thrust behind America’s impending need for a national flag and more specifically, one that would now be devoid of British ties. Sadly, Hopkinson’s original drawings for the flag have not survived, and while he illustrated 13 star flags at other times, as well as arrangements of 13 stars for display on other devices, his various depictions are inconsistent. Some of his earliest surviving renditions actually depict the stars in a random scattering, without order (fig. 4), and to further complicate the matter, sometimes the stars had 6-pointed profiles and sometimes they were 5-pointed. Perhaps there was a purpose behind these traits and perhaps not, but whatever the reason, the concept of no particular order does seem to coincide with the unspecified verbiage found in the original legislation. Further, since the type of star wasn’t specified, the use of

various styles may be likewise explained. And if one were to extend this concept over time, by assuming that freedom of choice was actually inherent in the flag's conception, the plethora of almost uncountable variations that followed in the 19th century and beyond makes a lot more sense.

Another important thing to note is the element of need versus available time and manpower. The fact that the Stars & Stripes materialized as more of a tool of war than a rallying point for the Revolution validates the use of just one run-on sentence to create it. Today most Americans would find it hard to believe that such a small handful of words, was used by men generally associated with flowery prose, to describe something so poorly, which modern society has come to hold so uncommonly sacred.

Now that I have described how and when our flag came about, and that the star configuration on the original remains a mystery, what did some of the earliest examples look like, and where might you find one? To better understand the answer to these questions, it is important to know that we have made 13 star flags throughout our history. So if you encounter one, don't presume that it dates to the 18th century. Misdating is common because 13 star flags are so poorly understood. Most people do not understand the longevity of 13 star flag production, and thus presume that if they are in possession of one, and it looks old, it must have been made when we had 13 states. Sometimes they want the flag to be period so badly that they will consider no other explanation. Families who have one that has been handed down over time are famous for this, but at one time, so were reputable museums, auction houses, and dealers. Perhaps the best example of this occurred at the Smithsonian, which once claimed to own a period example. When someone finally examined the flag properly for the purposes of dating it, it was found to

be later. Harold Langely, noted flag expert and the Smithsonian's former Director of Naval History, has been reported to say that he considers this to be one of the institution's greatest embarrassments.

So if you are looking for a Colonial/Revolutionary period 13 star flag—in other words, one made prior to the Treaty of Paris in 1783, or at the very least during the period when we had 13 states, prior to the 1791

admission of Vermont—I have some very bad news for you. Almost none exist. Vexillologist David Martucci compiled a survey of known illustrations and actual flags that are suspected or proven to date to that period. Of those dating between the flag's inception in 1777, and its 1795 replacement by the 15-star, 15-stripe flag, there are 47 entries. Among these are 5 actual flags. One of these, known as the Battle of Brandywine Flag, dates to 1777 and is the earliest of all 47 entries. This is burgundy red and white, incorporates no blue at all, and thus deviates fairly significantly from what one might expect. Another, known as the Society of Pewterers Flag, dates to 1788 and is a golden yellow flag that has a 13 star flag painted on it. This serves as the canton and is accompanied by a huge rendition of the society's crest, plus a scene of the interior of a pewterer's shop. Thought to be the earliest cloth American flag, in the correct colors, that can be positively dated, it is likewise not what one would expect. In some senses, it could just as easily be grouped with period paintings and engravings that include a 13 star flag among other imagery. Another example, known as the Guilford Court House Flag, has 13 stars with evidence of 14 original stripes. While logic suggests that it could potentially date between 1791-92, following the admission of Vermont, but prior to the addition of Kentucky, experts who have examined the flag generally agree that there could have actually been more stars, as well as more stripes. Like the first two flags, the Guilford example is unconventional. The stars are blue on a white canton and the stripes are red and blue only.

The only likely candidate that conforms to modern convention is a 4-5-4 pattern example, known as the "Fort Independence Flag" or the "Jonathan Fowle Flag." Donated in 1906 to the Massachusetts State House, it survives with family papers that document its history back to at least the War of 1812. A period family letter speaks of a flag donated to Fort Independence in 1781, but there is no proof that this flag and the Jonathan Fowle Flag are one-in-the-same. The 18th century State House has decided to apply an 18th century date, but vexillologists aren't sure. In summary, the probability is there, but the jury is still out.

Martucci suggests that the 5th example, known as the General Schuyler Flag, probably dates to the first decade of the 19th century, due to the 17 pales (vertical stripes) on the federal shield that appear on the breast of a large, central eagle. I generally agree. Because the flag has not yet been disproved with certainty, however, it was thoughtfully included in Martucci's survey. The compilation is a work in progress that gets updated periodically. As of today, I feel that there is at least one actual flag absent that perhaps needs to be added. An example in New London, Connecticut, known as the Nathaniel Shaw flag, seems a likely candidate



(Figure 4)
Francis Hopkinson's first proposal for the Great Seal of the United States, 1780. Note the random arrangement of 13 six-pointed stars. Photo courtesy National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.



(Figure 5)
13 star flag in a rare rendition of what has come to be known as the Trumbull pattern. This particular example was made ca. 1830–50. Artist John Trumbull, George Washington’s Aide-de-Camp, painted the general with several versions of the Stars & Stripes. Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.

and certainly warrants investigation, but the broader point of my discussion is to convey that actual 18th-century Stars & Stripes are nearly unknown, especially in a format that an average person might expect to see. The Smithsonian doesn’t own one, which in itself speaks volumes, and the collection of datable 18th-century illustrations is meager at best. Many are so tiny that the patterns and even the actual star counts are difficult to discern, or the flag is waving and the configuration may have been contrived.

Why are period 13 star flags so scarce? One reason is that they were not used in a way that one might expect. As previously stated, the primary purpose was for use on ships. The other important function was to identify forts and possibly other military camps/outposts. Ground regiments were, in fact, not authorized to carry it until the latter half of the 1830s. During the Revolution they sometimes may have,

but it was not customary and wasn’t officially sanctioned until the Mexican War (1846–48). Continental Army Regimental banners instead displayed imagery personal to their respective units. The myriad of devices and colors employed was inconsistent in every way. There were rattlesnakes, pine trees, soldiers and British lions (usually held at sword or spear-point). There were beavers, Indians, and conjoined rings to representing the colonies. There were eagles, arrows, lightning bolts, and stags, beehives, liberty poles, and various elements of the newly designed state/colonial crests. Their range of colors spanned every hue in the rainbow.

Washington at least is thought to have carried the Stars & Stripes and probably did so with some regularity. This seems logical for the command. Trumbull included Washington with it in several of his works, including *The Battle of Princeton* (June, 1777), *The Surrender of General Burgoyne*



(Figure 6)
13 Stars in a rare tombstone pattern, on an entirely hand-sewn flag with an embroidered date of July 4th, 1865.
Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.

at Saratoga, New York (October, 1777), and one of two versions of The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia (October 1781). None of these views were sketched or painted in first person, so it is uncertain whether the star designs of the American flags in these particular paintings were accurate for that particular engagement. Trumbull was, however, as previously indicated, known for his attention to detail. In *Standards and Colors of the American Revolution*, Richardson describes Trumbull as “meticulous to the accuracy of uniforms and accoutrements ... therefore, the flags depicted in [his] paintings should be considered as accurate versions of the time” (fig. 5).

In addition to it not having been regularly carried by the Army, private individuals probably didn't display the flag with any sort of regularity. We know that it appeared on floats during the 1788 Federal Procession, held on July 4th of that year in Philadelphia to celebrate the newly ratified U.S. Constitution, but observers are not reported to have

been waving it and this concept didn't become common in American culture until the Civil War. Because flags used to identify ships and garrisons were generally huge in scale, the larger the flag the less likely it was to have survived. So very few of this era can be expected to turn up in modern times.

While there are almost no period examples, hundreds of early 13 star flags exist. They simply don't date to the 18th century. In fact, many people are surprised to learn that 13 is one of the most common star counts on Stars & Stripes flags that survive from the 19th century. These were produced for a whole host of patriotic as well as practical reasons. One of the more prominent early uses of 13 star flags, post-Revolutionary War, occurred in 1825-1826, when General Lafayette returned to the U.S. from France for America's 50th birthday celebration. Flags with 13 stars were flown in celebration of the nation's centennial in 1876, and the sesquicentennial in 1926. They were displayed during the Civil War to reference past struggles for American liberty,

and were used by 19th-century politicians while campaigning for the same reason. The U.S. Navy flew 13 star flags on small boats until 1916, because it was easier to discern fewer stars at a distance on a small flag. Commercial flag-makers mirrored this practice and some private ships flew 13 star flags during the same period as the Navy.

Thirteen star flags were also popular during the 1st quarter of the 20th century and have been made throughout the entirety of our existence as a free nation. We still make and readily use them today. Because any American national flag that has ever been official remains official, 13 star flags are no less so than the 50 star flag. During the 2017 Presidential Inauguration, pairs of 13 star flags in two different patterns hung behind the lectern, between the columns of the United States Capital, flanking a 50 star flag. 2016 U.S. Olympians wore patches with a 13 star flag, instead of one with 50 stars, presented in a 3-2-3-2-3 arrangement.

Among 13 star flags that date between the 18th and the early 20th century, the number of known designs is rather staggering. A few years ago, when looking for an exciting new topic for a lecture I was giving at the Union League Club in New York, I decided to pull images of as many different 13 star designs that I could find among the flags that I had owned or handled. I said to myself, "I'll just pull an example of the 20 or so different styles and talk about them." In about 30 minutes, I had compiled over 40 varieties and, having taken the time to better contemplate the ones I knew about but had never owned, as well as a few others that were probably out there but I hadn't seen yet, concluded that the total was probably closer to 60 or 65. As of today, I have owned even more styles and have adjusted this figure accordingly, concluding that the realistic total probably falls somewhere between 80 and 100 arrangements (fig. 6).

One of the other interesting misconceptions about 13 star flags is that the pattern often associated with Betsy Ross, even if not the original design, must have been common in early America. Logic would suggest this, given the frequency with which it appears in modern times, but this isn't the case. In fact, the pattern is seldom encountered anywhere until much later. Exceptions include a 1779-1780 painting of George Washington at the Battle of Princeton, by Charles Willson Peale, that depicts in the background a flag that appears to have a circular wreath of stars, but no stripes. This is one of the few appearances of a circular pattern in a work period to the Revolutionary War, yet it wasn't the national flag and Peale may have used some artist's liberty in its inclusion. While known to be especially detailed and keen on accuracy, he made at least four copies of the painting prior to 1782, one of which shows the Battle of Trenton in lieu of Princeton (the original), so he obviously wasn't opposed to

alterations. Trumbull, included a flag with what may be a circular pattern in a 1787 painting of the Battle of Yorktown but the flag is waving and it is not known if the intended design is circular or oval.

Francis Hopkinson, credited designer of the Stars & Stripes, actually rendered a circular pattern of 13 eight-pointed stars, presented like the rowels of a spur, on a piece of 1778 Philadelphia currency. This did not show a flag and was not part of one. He included a similar rendering, surrounding a liberty cap, on a 1778 draft for the seal of the U.S. Board of War, but there is a flag affixed to the liberty pole on which the cap rests, and the flag, which displays only stars, arranges them in a 4-3-4-2 lineal pattern.

The only surviving 18th-century illustration of a 13 star, Stars & Stripes with a circular wreath and no center star, appears in a sketch by William Barton, which served as his 2nd draft for the Great Seal of the United States, presented to the 3rd Committee designated to select it. Though it does not survive, Barton's first draft is also said to have included such a flag. The final draft was not rendered by Barton, but by Congressional Secretary Charles Thompson, who included no flags, but did include an arrangement of 13 stars above the head of a federal eagle, placed in a random pattern. It is of interest to note that Francis Hopkinson produced some of the initial drafts of the seal, which also included 13 stars in a random scatter (fig. 4).

One of the best arguments against the Betsy Ross pattern having appeared on the original flag is illustrated by the fact that so many 13 star flags exist without it. If the Ross design was the original, it stands to reason that the pattern would have been reproduced with at least some degree of frequency. Most people are surprised to learn, however, that one will rarely encounter an American flag with the Betsy Ross pattern that was, with any degree of certainty, made before the 1890s. In fact, I have owned just one that I have claimed to pre-date the last decade of the 19th century.

Research conducted by the National Museum of American History notes that the story of Betsy Ross making the very first American flag for General George Washington, in the company of George Ross and Robert Morris, entered into American consciousness about the time of the 1876 centennial. The tale was immensely popular among an American public eager for stories about the Revolution and its heroes. The first documentation of it appeared shortly beforehand, in 1870, in a paper written by Betsy's grandson, William Canby, for the Pennsylvania Historical Society. At the time, Canby made no mention of how the flag was designed, save for the fact that it had 5-pointed stars, per his grandmother's suggestion. Because no earlier documentation supports the story, most

flag scholars feel it was a grand hoax, fabricated by Canby for his own interests. Nothing survives in the collective writings of the three men, for example, nor in records of their words and deeds, which are fairly extensive. As with most things, reality is perhaps somewhere in the middle ground, with some of the details based on fact and some on fiction, made up, misinterpreted, or imagined from family accounts.

The first time that a star configuration gets attached to the Ross story appears to have occurred during the last decade of the 19th century. In 1892, Charles Weisgerber painted a nine-by-twelve-foot rendition of the fabled meeting between Betsy and George Washington, in which there is a flag with a circular wreath. Shortly afterwards, in 1898, Betsy's granddaughter and great-granddaughter began to make flags in the East Wing of Independence Hall in Philadelphia, selling them to tourists while disseminating the family folk tale (fig. 7). In that same year, Weisgerber and a "group of concerned citizens" sought to preserve Betsy's former Philadelphia residence at 239 Arch Street, where she lived at the time the flag would have been sewed. Weisgerber moved his family into the house and immediately opened to the public the room in which Betsy was said to have worked her magic. Ten-cent memberships were sold to fund renovations and donors received a small calendar, to which a cotton 13 star Betsy Ross pattern parade flag was affixed. The effects of these events caused the Ross legend to stick and the story, with the corresponding flag design, has appeared ever since in more places than one could ever hope to count. Even today, with the availability of better historical information, two of those 13 star flags at the presidential inauguration bore the Betsy Ross design.

The Federal Period & The Antebellum ...Or Perhaps Not?

Over the years, one of the phrases that I have repeated to clients again and again is that "13 star flags are their own animal." Because we have made them throughout our history, one has to date them by construction, as well as by various other factors, best learned with the experience of handling hundreds of examples. With many other Stars & Stripes, and variants thereof, one can at least start by considering the star count, then ruling less obvious factors in or out to nail down the period of manufacture. There are areas of flag collecting, however, in which this becomes fairly tricky. This is especially true of what I call "the low star counts," which, by my definition, include anything with 30 stars or fewer (pre-1850). These are the flags in which collectors, dealers, auction houses, museums, and other experts, seem to make consistent errors. Even some of the leading collectors have had great trouble with proper identification of material in this period. Why? Perhaps the primary reason is this: If you were to group all of the flags

together that have a star count between 14 and 30, the vast majority of this total were not produced during the period when we had the corresponding number of states. In this way they are not unlike 13 star flags. I have explained some of the many instances in which they were made after we had 13 states, but why were other, later star counts made "out-of-period," so-to-speak? There are several reasons. One, some star counts were included on later flags, made to celebrate anniversaries of statehood or to otherwise glorify that particular state, perhaps for its pavilion at a World's Fair or some other patriotic event. At other times, a group or organization may have used a star count to designate when it was founded.

Sometimes the makers of flags simply ignored the official or otherwise accurate star count, in lieu of practical or decorative considerations. Continued use of 13 star flags by the U.S. Navy, after we no longer had 13 states, has previously been mentioned, with the purpose of keeping the star count for better visibility. More than 95% of the Navy's "small boat ensigns," as they were called, seem to have bore the 13 star count, at least from the mid-19th century through the 19-teens. Other low counts, however, are known on Navy flags that date to the mid-19th century specifically, including 16 and 20 stars, and it is suspected that other counts were probably employed, such as 12, 15, and perhaps 24 stars. The Navy seems to have preferred various low counts where the number could be laid out easily, either in staggered rows or a neat rectangle.

Flags with 16 stars are of particular interest to this discussion, because, like 13 stars, their meaning in later flags may have been two-fold. When the Revolutionary War ended in 1783, the nation's warships were sold to pay down federal debt. With the sale of the ships, the Continental Navy and Marines ceased to exist. In 1798, President John Adams signed a bill that officially reestablished the United



(Figure 7)
13 star flag made by Betsy Ross's granddaughter, Rachel Albright, in 1905, in the East Wing of Independence Hall, Philadelphia. Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.



(Figure 8)
 American Revenue Cutter Service Ensign once belonging to Captain William Henry Bagley (b. 1838, Durham, Maine), a rare and fantastically visual example, made ca 1870-80.
 Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.

States Department of the Navy and the United States Marine Corps. Since this took place during the period when we had 16 states (1796-1803), there are some who suggest that the later use of the 16-stars by the Navy may have paid homage to the founding of these two important cornerstones of the American military.

In addition to the materials used to make 16 star flags in the 1850s and 60s, one of the most obvious clues to their out-of-period date can be found in their number of stripes. In 1795, the star count was officially increased, by way of the Second Flag Act, which added stars for Vermont and Kentucky. These two states had entered in 1791 and 1792, respectively. At this time, the stripe count was also increased to 15. The logic of adding both stripes and stars may have begun between 1791 and 1795, with the making of flags before the official change. It is then presumed to have continued for another 23 years, until 1818, when the Third Flag Act was passed. This officially added 5 more stars for Tennessee, Ohio, Louisiana, Indiana and Mississippi, but returned the stripe count to the original 13. The act also provided that, going forward, a star would officially be added for each state on the 4th of July following its admission.

In spite of this legislation, and that which preceded it, no

one seems to have cared very much about what was official with regard to American flags during the 18th and 19th centuries. Stars were sometimes added even before a new state came into the Union. While we technically went from 13 stars to 15 to 20, both actual flags and illustrations are known showing 16, 17, 18, and 19 star variants. 16 star flags, for example, are known to have been produced between 1796 and 1803, to reflect Tennessee statehood, as evidenced by surviving illustrations and one surviving flag at the Stonington Historical Society in Stonington, Connecticut. These have 16 stripes.

In 1790, U.S. Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton created the Revenue Marine, better known in later years as the Revenue Cutter Service, and which eventually transformed into the U.S. Coast Guard. Its original purpose was to protect merchant ships to ensure safe passage, which aided in the treasury's collection of tolls. In 1799 a flag design was approved by Congress for Revenue Marine vessels. This was an adaptation of the national flag, with an eagle in the canton, positioned beneath an arch of stars, and with a field of 16 vertical stripes that represented the current number of states (fig. 8). Though the flag design was later altered, with seal of the Coast Guard superimposed onto the field, the number of stripes remains the same until this day.

One 17 star, 17 stripe flag is known, with specific history of British capture during the War of 1812, and an illustration of a 17 star flag on a period snuff box shows a complement of 17 stripes. All of the surviving 15 star flags that have been identified as dating sometime prior to the Third Flag Act, have 15 stripes. So prior to 1818, the apparent logic was to add a stripe for every star. Flags made with lower star counts in later periods, by contrast, quite consistently have 13 stripes. This is true of the 12, 15, 16, 20, and 24 star examples that I have mentioned, which are believed to have been flown by the Navy during the mid-19th century.

I have thus far explained a few of the reasons why some low star counts were made out-of-period, but there were others. Of particular interest to both this discussion, and the collecting interests of flag enthusiasts in general, are a group of both Northern and Southern flags made during the War of the Rebellion (1861-65). Because some of these flags display pre-1850 star counts, they bridge the gap into the next period of flag history.

The Civil War: A Spectrum of Star Counts, Constellations, and Messages

When war broke out on April 12th, 1861, there were 33 official stars on the American national flag. On that day, when the Confederates fired upon Fort Sumter, South Carolina, the flag flying on the garrison had 33 stars, arranged in a spectacular diamond configuration. Now in the hands of the National Park Service, this is one of fewer than 10 pieced-and-sewn examples that I am aware of that displays some variant of this coveted arrangement (fig. 9).

The Fort Sumpter flag was lowered by Major Robert Anderson on April 14, 1861, when he surrendered his position. Under the terms agreed to by Southern aggressors, Anderson was allowed to leave and traveled immediately to New York where, just six days later, on April 20th, he displayed the flag in Manhattan at a patriotic rally. More than 100,000 people flooded Union Square to view it, where it was flown from the equestrian statue of George Washington, in what was, by some accounts, the largest public gathering that had yet to occur in America up and until that time. The flag then proceeded on a journey. Escorted from town to town throughout the North, it was repeatedly sold at auction to raise funds for the war effort. High bidders were expected to immediately donate the flag back to the nation, and it would promptly be taken to the next rally to compound the fundraising effort. By this method, the flag became an iconic symbol of the Union. It was most certainly viewed by more people than any other example of the Stars & Stripes had been before, and it seems likely that this exposure was the

central catalyst to the widespread public display of American flags that followed at private households and businesses. At this point flag production escalated tremendously to meet the new demand of not only military, but civilian buyers.

Although 33 was the official star count in April of 1861, Kansas had already joined the Union as a Free State on the preceding January 29th. This is why flag-makers generally bypassed the 33 star flag, in favor of producing examples with an additional star, even though it would not be officially added until July 4th of that year. It made little sense to produce flags that would soon have to be updated with a 34th star, that everyone knew was coming. For this reason early war production favored flags in the 34 star count almost universally.

In 1863, 11 days before the Battle of Gettysburg, West Virginia was annexed from Virginia to join the Union as a new state. Though its residents generally sided with the Confederacy, it was a Free State and a 35th star was officially added to the flag on July 4th.

On Halloween, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln pushed Nevada through to statehood, just 8 days before the November election. The territory's wealth in silver was attractive to a



(Figure 9)
One of the few known flags with a diamond configuration, 34 stars, Civil War period, 1861-63, having an applied banner with a patriotic slogan that reads "WE LOVE EVERY STRIPE AND STAR."

Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.



(Figure 10)
 North Carolina Secessionist flag with 11 stars in a tombstone pattern, 11 stripes, and the letters “LPF” presumed to stand for “Liberty, Plenty, Freedom,” 1861.
 Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.

nation struggling with the debts of war and general public opinion among residents of the territory favored support for the Republican ticket. While the 36th star wasn't officially added until July 4th of 1865, the makers of printed parade flags (also called handwavers), are known to have begun adding the 36th star as early as July of 1864. This was several months before the addition of Nevada actually occurred and a full year before its star was formally sanctioned per the Flag Act of 1818. As previously suggested, the presumptive addition of stars was common practice. Anticipatory star counts reflected the nation's desire for Westward Expansion, as well as the hope of flag-makers to bring new star counts to market before their competitors. Makers of pieced-and-sewn flags for civilian consumption probably added the 36th star early as well, but military contracts were complete by this time. Available stock was in great surplus and it is highly unordinary to find a 36 star flag slated for wartime military function.

So far I have explained how several star counts were in use in the North during the war. There were leftover 33, already in active service and there were probably others among the existing stock of flag-makers or sellers. There may have also been a tiny handful made by the odd individual who was stuck to congressional law and didn't add the next star until the proper time came. Most of the wartime flags were 34s, while a significant, yet smaller number were 35s. 36s appeared as well, just not in active military service, with the rarest of possible exceptions. This summary would hardly explain, however, the wide spectrum of star counts actually produced in the North, and I have not yet even touched on the South, where different variants of the Stars & Stripes appeared.

At the onset of the war, Lincoln fervently urged the American people not to remove those stars from the flag that represented seceded states. He felt strongly that there was great need to demonstrate that he had not written off American

citizens who were living in the South, yet did not support Confederate views. He also understood the need to show both the nation and the world that the federal government was strong and would do everything in its power to ensure victory.

Despite Lincoln's pleas, some flag makers did as they chose, removing stars for states in the Confederate cause. Interestingly enough, the same was actually true in the South, both on Confederate flags and on adaptations of the Stars & Stripes that displayed Southern sympathies. Here stars were removed that represented the North (fig. 10).

The number of stars selected for an “exclusionary” or “inclusionary” flag, as they are called—either term being anatomically correct depending on one's position—was based on the number of states that the maker felt were loyal to the Union or the Confederacy at any given time. Because the number of both Confederate and Union States changed during the course of the war, while several states had mixed loyalties, the list of possible calculations is quite complicated. Among Union sympathizing exclusionary flags, for example, the number of stars can conceivably range between 18 and 27. Among their Southern counterparts, the number can presumably range between 1 and 16, though in almost all cases one would expect a figure of somewhere between 7 and 15.

Seven states agreed to secede together to show solidarity on February 2nd, 1861, in what is termed the “First Wave of Secession.” These included South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas. Some exclusionary flags appear to highlight a particular state, however, within these first 7, because there *was* an actual order in which each state government ratified its popular vote of the people. I once owned a flag with 6 stars, for example, that was passed down through a family in New Orleans who had no idea as to what the star count meant. Louisiana was the 6th state to approve secession with ratification by the state legislature. A total of 11 states eventually would, adding to the list Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina to the original list of 7.

Two of the 4 remaining Slave States, Missouri and Kentucky, were considered Border States, but were formally accepted into the Confederacy by Jefferson Davis. This occurred as a result of the loyalty of key figures within those states, plus a willingness and capability of contributing to the war effort. This is why most Confederate flags in the Southern Cross format (a.k.a. “Confederate Battle Flag” or “Flag of the Army of Northern Virginia”) display 13 stars. Each of these states supplied Union regiments and neither approved secession by proper legislative channels.

The two remaining Slave States of Maryland and Delaware are seldom ever represented by stars on either military flags or homemade examples, but on rare occasion

14 and 15 star counts do appear. The last Border State, West Virginia, almost never appears on Southern sympathy flags, but does get segregated out occasionally on various pro-Union examples (fig. 11).

At the same time that star counts were being manipulated, messages were also displayed in other ways. Sometimes the Southern Cross design was included in the star configuration of a traditional Stars & Stripes. Two such examples of this actually survive in flags with a count of 13 stars, where all of the stars were used to form this pattern. In this case, it is not known whether the makers meant to represent the 13 Southern states that typically appear on Confederate battle flags, or if an unusual parallel was being drawn between the American Revolution and the War of the Rebellion. A flag such as this might theoretically appear in a border state like Maryland or Delaware, which were among the 13 original colonies, but were not among Davis's 13 Confederate States.

It has been suggested by some flag historians, myself included, that Southern sympathy versions of the Stars & Stripes may also have been flown to mark locations in the North, where Southerners might find refuge of some sort. In the case of 13 stars, all arranged in the Southern Cross, that message was probably too bold to have been flown north of the Mason-Dixon. Other flags exist, however, produced both before and after the war, that somehow include the Southern Cross within a wider design that contained stars for all of the states (fig. 12). Here the message would be more likely to appear in a Northern setting.

In addition to hidden messages, which are scarce among surviving flags, there was an explosion of star designs in general during the Civil War. This occurred, if for no other reason, than the sheer increase in flag production. Star configurations had always been interesting, but with more stars and many more makers came a thrust in creativity. Add to this the surge of emotions brought on by war, and what resulted was one of the most interesting periods of flag making. This was the first time, for example, that flags appeared where the design actually spelled something. Made for the 1864 campaign of the incumbent Abraham Lincoln seeking reelection, both 35 and 36 star variants are known with their stars arranged to spell the word "free" (fig. 13).

Shield-shaped patterns make their appearance during this era, appropriate for the occasion. Battle flags displayed a wide variety of patterns, among these standing oval wreaths and flags with the various state and federal arms included in their cantons. The names of regiments were sometimes painted or appliquéd on the stripes, along with battle honors that recorded the names of significant engagements with the enemy. Some of the rarest displayed eagles interspersed with the stars. The most interesting of these that I ever personally



(Figure 11)
Flag with 38 stars presented in 3 different styles, including 16 in the center to represent the official Confederate States plus all Border States at the end of the Civil War, surrounded by 20 stars representing the Union, plus a star top and bottom for the 37th and 38th states that joined after the war. Also note the inclusion of only 12 stripes, purposely excluding South Carolina (the catalyst of secession). Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.



(Figure 12)
38 stars with some of the arrangement forming a Southern Cross. Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.



(Figure 13.5)
Extraordinary American parade flag with a large federal eagle surrounded by 34 stars, arranged in a single wreath of 30 with a large star in each corner; one-of-a-kind among known examples. Note the remarkably squashed profiles of the smaller stars. Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.



(Figure 13)
35 stars arranged to spell the word "FREE," made for the 1864 campaign of Abraham Lincoln.
Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.

encountered included a large eagle, standing on a globe, with wings outstretched above 34 eight-pointed stars, clearly illustrating the goal of unification. Eagles can be seen both before and after the war, but some of the most interesting are found at this time (fig. 13.5).

Because the Civil War generated the production of so many more Stars & Stripes, with private individuals now flying, waving, and hanging them with far greater frequency, in addition to with regularity, plus the massive surge in military demand, the possibilities for today's collector become far more bountiful during the Civil War and beyond. In fact, pre-Civil War flags represent about 1 percent of surviving material that is of interest to collectors.

America Celebrates a Birthday

The next surge in flag-related patriotism occurred during our nation's 100-year anniversary of independence. Here was yet another time where several star counts were used,

but the message was now generally unified. Pro-Union and pro-Southern flags existed in that era, but most of the Stars & Stripes displayed one of four star counts, including 37, 38, 39, and 13 stars. In 1876, 37 was the official count. It would remain so until July 3rd, 1877, but Colorado was admitted to the Union almost a year prior, on August 1st, 1876. Some flag-makers, seeking to distinguish themselves, selected an alternative, anticipatory count of 39 stars, to reflect what they felt was the forthcoming addition of both Colorado and the Dakota Territory. The latter of which did not achieve statehood at this time.

In addition to the three above counts, 13 star flags were also made to celebrate Colonial America. It is of interest to note that this was perhaps the first time that reproductions of the Grand Union appeared, produced with similar sentiments.

All sorts of star configurations are encountered at the centennial, along with text that commemorated the event. Political campaign flags were in use, and although extremely



(Figure 14)
Antique American flag with 10-pointed stars that spell “1776-1876”, made for the 100-year anniversary of American independence, one of the most graphic of all early examples. Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.

scarce in the 1870s, for some unexplained reason, at least one flag survives with a fantastic portrait of Lady Columbia. Holding a liberty pole and flanked by an American eagle, federal shield and cannon, she is surrounded by text that reads “Centennial” and the dates “1776-1876.” All of this appears beneath the names of “Hayes & Wheeler,” the successful Republican presidential ticket in that year (fig. 14). The same maker produced flags without the “Hayes & Wheeler” text, in two sizes and utilizing four different Lady Liberty engravings, as well as with and even rarer image of George Washington. Less rare, but no less memorable, is one of the most beautiful designs of any period, in which a flag-maker employed 10-pointed stars to spell out the dates of the relevant anniversary (fig. 15).

The 38 star flag became official on July 4th, 1877 and remained so until July 3rd, 1890. Generally produced until 4 more states joined the Union in 1889, 38 was the last star count in which many flag makers decided to use circular and star-shaped designs. The diamonds, starbursts, pentagons, and other fantastical arrangements had effectively been retired, and for some reason lineal patterns were growing in popularity across the board; designs were standardizing, even without the encouragement of legislation. Although a direct correlation remains unknown, the fact that flag ethics began to emerge at this very same time was probably no coincidence.

There is a fairly large variety of lineal configurations among flags with 39–47 stars, but even circular designs—the most common class of star patterns beyond rows or columns—evaporate during this 1889-1912 time frame. They still appear, but only in instances ranging between scarce and to extraordinarily rare. For instance, there is just one known example of a 43 star parade flag with a circular pattern, and just one in the 47 star count as well.

The last of the wreath patterns produced in any significant quantity whatsoever, with greater than 13 stars, is something collectors call the Whipple pattern. With the forthcoming addition of the last two remaining Western Territories of New Mexico and Arizona as the 47th and 48th states, more than 150 designs are said to have been submitted to the War Department alone, in hope of being chosen as first official star pattern. This is to say nothing of those solicited to President Howard Taft and members of Congress. Despite inaccurate reports to the contrary, there was no actual competition and no official entries, but interested parties offered up suggestions all-the-same through various channels. According to David Martucci, the War Department claims to have considered none of them, even though more than one is said to have matched the eventual design selected. Since this was simply 6 justified rows of 8 stars, however, the probability of several matches out of 150 was fairly high.

The only star configuration that seems to have been injected with a good public relations campaign was the one recommended by Wayne Whipple. A resident of Philadelphia, his concept was actually a combination of circular and star-shaped formations. It centered on 13 stars, arranged in one, large 6-pointed star, in the design that appeared on the Great Seal of the United States. This was followed by two wreaths, the first of which contained 25 stars, to represent those states that were added to the Union over the first 100 years, followed by another with 10, stars for those that came afterward. Whipple, who worked in the publishing industry and authored about 28 books, took ads to promote the pattern. He also glorified the design in a book he released called *The Story of the American Flag*, and actually went to the extent of having prototypes made. These he distributed at political rallies and to members of Congress, as well as to other individuals with government or military influence. There were at least two parade flag versions, printed on cotton and silk, respectively, the latter of which I suspect to have been made by the Cheney Silk Company of Manchester, Connecticut. He also commissioned the only



(Figure 16)
48 star flag designed and commissioned by Wayne Whipple, sent by him to President Howard Taft. Acquired from descendents of the Whipple Family with an array of letters, documents, and mock-ups for the design.
Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.



(Figure 15)
36 star flag made for the 1876 Centennial Exposition, with a block-printed image of Lady Liberty, adapted for the Presidential Campaign Rutherford B. Hayes.
Photo courtesy Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc.

two pieced -and-sewn examples that I have ever encountered, both of which I have been fortunate enough to own. One of these, handed down directly through the Whipple family, was accompanied by his own mock-ups, a hand-written 50-page letter about the design from Whipple to his daughter, and letters to-and-from Taft and the War Department, respectively (fig. 16). This exact flag was sent by Whipple to Taft, who would soon write Executive Order 1556, that, for the first time, dictated our flag's official specifications. Among these was its star pattern. Taft forwarded Whipple's flag to the War Department, which then sent it back to Whipple with a "thanks-but-no-thanks" reply. In the end, the War Department would select an artistically bland, though certainly logical and militaristic arrangement. Taft deferred to War Department recommendations and approved the pattern on June 24th, 1912.

Along with standardization of the proportions and colors, this generally ended the 135-year period in American history, where the design of our flag followed the tune of free-thinking ingenuity and timely circumstances. This is the music that collectors of early American folk art prefer, and, when played in the vicinity of someone enamored with history and patriotism, can kindle a flag collection.

Jeff Bridgman, owner of Jeff R. Bridgman Antiques, Inc., is widely regarded as the leading dealer of antique American flags. He also operates a textile conservation business where he has supervised the mounting and framing of thousands of examples. He can be reached via his website at www.JeffBridgman.com.