

## Brief History of the Design of the United States Flag

The first, albeit unofficial, United States national flag appeared on 1 January 1776 when the new Continental Army became official and General George Washington hoisted the 'Continental Colors'.<sup>1</sup> This flag featured the Union Jack in the canton, to symbolize loyalty to Britain, and thirteen alternating red and white stripes, to symbolize the colonies and their unity.<sup>2</sup> Congress took no action in regards to a new flag when they proclaimed the Declaration of Independence.<sup>3</sup> Finally, on 14 June 1777, Congress declared that the official United States national flag will have thirteen stripes alternating red and white, and the Union, or canton, will contain thirteen white stars on a blue field.<sup>4</sup> Star arrangements within the canton varied, either in rows or in a circle.<sup>5</sup>

The first official national flag remained until 1795. In 1791 and 1792 Vermont and Kentucky, respectively, joined the union rendering the flag inaccurate. A motion passed by the Senate in 1793 called for two new stars and two new stripes. The new 15-star, 15-stripe flag remained official for the next 23 years.<sup>6</sup>

When new states entered the union in the decades after 1795, unofficial variations to the national flag appeared. These variations featured additional stars and stripes for each new state. No official government action occurred until Representative Peter Wendover of New York in 1816 suggested Congress set up a flag study committee. On 2 January 1817 Wendover's committee recommended that the national flag should include thirteen stripes, to represent the original thirteen colonies, and a star for each state in the union with additional stars added when new states are admitted. The committee's suggestion became law, effective 4 July 1818, with a star added for each new state effective on the fourth of July next succeeding such admission. The law also specified that the stripes should remain horizontal. However, the law did not address the star arrangement in the canton.<sup>7</sup>

Since 1818 the design has remained relatively unchanged.<sup>8</sup> President Taft, via an executive order dated 24 June 1912, established the official star arrangement pattern for the 48-star flag - six horizontal rows of eight each, a single point of each star to be upward. Following suit, President Eisenhower, via an executive order dated 3 January 1959, established the star arrangement for the new 49-star flag - seven rows of seven stars each, staggered horizontally and vertically. Another executive order from President Eisenhower dated 21 August provided for the arrangement of the stars in nine rows staggered horizontally and eleven rows staggered vertically. On 4 July 1960 the present United States national flag featuring fifty stars became official after Hawaii's entrance into the union.

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<sup>1</sup> Whitney Smith, *The Flag Book of the United States* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1970), pp. 48-50.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.