

Flag Day

By Judy Haynes



Flag Day, the anniversary of the day when the Continental Congress approved the design of the United States flag in 1777, is June 14th. It follows soon after Memorial Day, where in some states and towns there will be more parades and visits to cemeteries. The American Legion organizes Boylston's Memorial Day festivities which are celebrated in a big way; thus, little pomp and circumstance is seen here just two weeks later.

However, in the 1960s, the American Legion Boylston Post 398 produced postcards with a bit of flag history and encouraged one and all to fly our national flag on June 14th. In their archives, the Boylston Historical Society holds postcards dating from 1967 – 1976.

Each has a message, but the 1967 card had a particularly sad ‘times telling’ message as follows:



FLAG DAY POSTCARDS
BHSM Archive Collection

“Perhaps in no time in our history has it been so important that we make this FLAG DAY one that will erase the dishonor and desecration our FLAG has recently been subjected to in various localities.American Legion Post No. 398, Boylston Mass. encourages all of its Citizens to properly display our National FLAG on this day.”¹

This was during the time when some Americans were protesting the war in Vietnam, and perhaps the “desecration” mentioned refers to those acts when there had been unceremoniously burning of the flag and protest marches. Those acts were contrary to a time when veterans organizations held special ceremonies to properly retire old or worn-out flags, and then burned it in a sanctioned way “according to a resolution by the American Legion in 1937.”² Those special ceremonies were often held by our veterans on June 14, Flag Day.

Colony Flag

Our flag as we know it today had its roots and earliest design during the Revolutionary War, but



APPEAL TO HEAVEN FLAG
Popular Early New England Flag
Reproduction on display in BHSM museum

previous to the stars and stripes, each of the colonies had flags of their own. One example is a white flag with a green pine tree in the center, and the motto ‘An Appeal to Heaven,’ is written on the flag. This was popular throughout New England and Massachusetts for its State Navy. The Boylston Historical Society has a reproduction of that flag hanging from the wall on the second floor of our museum in the Historic Town Hall.

Grand Union Flag

The immediate predecessor to the United States flag was a flag that held thirteen stripes, representing the colonies, with the canton showing crosses of St. George and St. Andrew, indicating the colonies relation to the mother country. It was known as the Grand Union Flag. “It was hoisted by General Washington in January 1776, at Cambridge, Massachusetts, as the standard of the Continental Army, and it was also carried ashore by the Marines who made an expedition to the Bahamas in March of 1776. As the flag of the Revolution, it was used on many occasions before June 14, 1777, up until the Continental Congress authorized the Stars and Stripes.”³ Then the Grand Union flag was no longer used and the flag no longer carried the St. George and St. Andrew crosses, representing union with Great Britain.



GRAND UNION FLAG
Makaristos, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

¹From Boylston Historical Society collection, American Legion Boylston Post 398 Postcard, 1967.

² Cody Spoon, “The Importance, history of Flag Day,” Anniston Army Depot Public Affairs, June 10, 2021.

³ “How to Respect and Display Our Flag. U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Govt. Printing office. 1965., p. 23.

The Stars and Stripes

The Boylston Historical Society Museum also has a reproduction of the flag that was claimed to be one of the earliest designs created by Elizabeth “Betsy” Ross, a flag maker for the Pennsylvania State Navy in 1777. This one has the thirteen stripes of red and white, and a blue field with a circle of thirteen stars representing the first colonies.



BETSEY ROSS FLAG

13 Stars and 13 Stripes Flag
Makaristos, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

“The Stars and Stripes, whose birthday we observe on June 14, was created On that date, in 1777, when the Continental 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. The first Army flag had the stars arranged in a circle presumably based on the idea that no colony should take precedence.”

The origin of the first United States flag design and who was the seamstress of the first flag is unknown. Some historians believe it was Congressman Francis Hopkinson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence who, toward the end of the Revolution, designed a flag in 1777 and they claim the flag was sewn by Betsey Ross, however there is no credible evidence that supports the fact Betsey was the seamstress.

Records indicate Francis Hopkinson requested the Continental Congress in 1780 to be paid 9 pounds for his flag design, however since it was not acted upon favorably, it is questionable if his design was used as evidenced by:

“For supplying a drawing of the Flag of the United States...there is little doubt that This was some form of the Stars and Stripes, but Congress merely resolved on August 31, 1781, ‘That the report relative to the fancywork of F. Hopkinson Ought not to be acted upon.’”⁴

The circle of 13 stars and 13 stripes flag was replaced when two new states were added. The flag flown on the ‘Guerriere’ as she sailed from Boston on July 25, 1818, for Cowes, England, had the stars arranged in staggered formation in alternate lines and rows of threes and twos on the field of blue.

“However, on September 9, 1818, the Board of Navy Commissioners received a directive from President Monroe that ‘the Flag of the United States shall conform to the pattern, herewith transmitted, viz: twenty stars [note now 7 more states are represented from the original 13 stars] in a blue union, and thirteen stripes, red and white, alternately, according to the Act of Congress passed on the fourth of April last; of which you will please to give due notice to the Naval Commanders, and the necessary directions for making the Flags.’”⁵

Once this was established in 1818, the flag to this day retains the thirteen stripes representing the first colonies, and the field of blue still holds white stars, but now all fifty stars represent our present United States, one for each of the states.

In 1885 and for many years after, a Wisconsin teacher, Bernard Cigrand, lobbied the Congress to hold an annual flag day observance on June 14. It was not until 1916 when President Woodrow Wilson declared June 14 as Flag Day. And on “August 3, 1949 Congress designated June 14 as National Flag Day, which was celebrated in correlation with the U.S. Army’s birthday.”⁶

According to the official Flag Code “the flag represents a living country and is considered a living thing.”⁷ There are specific standards to be followed. The United States flag is to be flown only in daylight or with a permanent outdoor light shining upon it at night. It is to be flown only in good weather unless it is designed for all weather use. You will notice we proudly fly our United States flag at Boylston’s Historic Town Hall on 9 Central Street with a town lamppost lighting the all-weather flag at night according to flag etiquette. If you wish to see this flag, the colonial flag with pine tree design or the early flag design with the circle of stars on a field of blue, or other patriotic artifacts please visit at our local Boylston Historical Society Museum at 9 Central Street.



⁴ The Flag of the United States, booklet by John Hancock Mutual Insurance Co.1960, p.8.

⁵ Ibid, p.24.

⁶ Cody Spoon, “The Importance, history of Flag Day,” Anniston Army Depot Public Affairs.

⁷ www.history of the flag, Anniston Army Depot, Ala.

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