Walk into a souvenir shop anywhere near Philadelphia and you will see the same small drama sketched on mugs and tea towels: a resolute Betsy Ross sitting by a window, needle in hand, while George Washington and two colleagues stand nearby with a sketch of a new flag. The scene is charming. It is also the product of a family story published almost a century after the Revolution. The truth behind the first American flag is both richer and messier, with real people, real pay stubs, and **gift ideas funny flag** a good dose of mythmaking.

This is not a takedown of Betsy Ross. She was a skilled upholsterer who made flags professionally during the war. Her name deserves to be in the conversation. But the evidence points to a broader, more collaborative birth for the flag, one that also involves a bookish New Jersey statesman, a terse congressional resolution, and a country figuring itself out on the fly.

What exactly counts as the first American flag?

Before tackling who sewed which stars, we need to define the flag we are talking about. Two different banners claim early American status, and people blend them without noticing.

The first national banner widely used by American forces was the Grand Union Flag, also called the Continental Colors. It looked like a hybrid: thirteen red and white stripes representing the colonies, with the British Union in the canton. It likely made its earliest naval appearance in late 1775 and was hoisted by George Washington’s forces on New Year’s Day, 1776, in Cambridge. It fit the political limbo of the moment. The colonies were fighting Britain but many still hoped for reconciliation, so the stripes signaled unity while the Union in the corner kept the door ajar.

The first official flag of the United States, the one we usually mean when we say the American flag, came later. On June 14, 1777, the Continental Congress passed a brief resolution: that the flag of the United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white, and that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation. No drawing. No pattern of the stars. No ratio of the canton to the fly. That lack of detail is why countless period flags all look slightly different, and it is why debates about the first arrangement have room to run.

So, when someone asks, when was the American flag first created, you can answer in two ways that are both accurate. The nation adopted a de facto banner in 1775 to 1776 with the Grand Union Flag. The official American flag, with stars replacing the British Union, was defined by Congress in 1777.

The Betsy Ross story and what we can prove

The Betsy Ross legend traces to 1870, when her grandson, William Canby, presented a paper to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. He said that Washington, Robert Morris, and George Ross visited Betsy’s upholstery shop in 1776 and asked her to make a national flag. In his telling, she suggested five pointed stars instead of six, then proved how quickly they could be cut by folding fabric and snipping once. The story landed well. It spread through centennial celebrations, schoolbooks, and later, the dedicated Betsy Ross House museum.

What does the paper trail say? There is no surviving document from 1776 or 1777 that records a congressional commission to Betsy Ross for a national flag. That absence matters. Government records of the era are incomplete, but in this case there is documentary silence where many would wish for noise.

What we do have are two important types of evidence. First, Betsy Ross was real, trained, and busy. Born Elizabeth Griscom, she apprenticed as an upholsterer, married John Ross, and kept the trade after his death. Upholstery then meant sails, covers, and colors as much as settees. Second, archival records show payments to an Elizabeth Ross for flags for the Pennsylvania Navy in 1777. Those are not national flags under a federal contract, but they are bona fide flagmaking jobs for public authorities in Philadelphia in the months after the 1777 resolution. She was a flag maker, not a myth.

The five pointed star anecdote also holds up as a practical craft lesson, regardless of authorship. If you fold fabric just so, you can indeed produce a crisp five pointed star with one clean cut. I learned that trick at a historical reenactment where a costumed seamstress did it in a heartbeat and then handed the star to a fourth grader who still remembers the moment. The technique wears well because it solves a real production problem quickly.

Where the legend outruns the evidence is the leap from active, documented flag maker to first and primary maker of the national flag under the eyes of Washington. That leap rests on family oral history. It might be true in part, but historians cannot verify it the way they can a supplier invoice from a navy board or a congressional order.

The other contender: Francis Hopkinson’s paper trail

If you tinker at a desk instead of a sewing bench, Francis Hopkinson is your candidate. A New Jersey statesman, lawyer, and signer of the Declaration of Independence, Hopkinson served on the Continental

Congress's committees for naval affairs and currency. He left something critical that Betsy Ross did not: written claims for payment for his design work.

In 1780, Hopkinson billed the Board of Admiralty for designs of several public symbols, including the Great Seal of the United States and a naval flag. He provided drawings of stars set in a blue canton and later correspondence that ties his designs to federal use. Congress denied the specific payment for the flag, quibbling that he had served as a public official while doing the work, but the exchange anchors him in the story with ink, not nostalgia. Historians disagree on whether this establishes him as the designer of the first official flag. The case is not ironclad, mostly because the 1777 resolution did not fix a layout and because many flag makers took liberties with star patterns. But if you are looking for documentary weight behind the question, Hopkinson carries it.

Some early flags show six pointed stars, a European habit, while others depict five. That variation is not a contradiction. In the 1770s and 1780s, a design specification might say stars on blue, not how many per row, how many points, or the exact measurements of the canton. Different makers filled in those blanks according to skill, tools, and time. Hopkinson's drawings show five pointed stars, and his other projects reveal a mind comfortable with pattern and proportion.

So, who designed the American flag? The fairest answer gives shared roles to Congress for the concept, Hopkinson for design inputs we can document, and working artisans like Ross for turning cloth into symbols that could fly from a yardarm.

What Congress actually decided in 1777

The Flag Resolution of June 14, 1777 is mercifully brief, and that brevity birthed a world of variation. It did two things that still define the flag:

- It fixed the number and colors of the stripes at thirteen, alternating red and white.
- It declared that the union should be a blue field with thirteen white stars, representing a new constellation.

Notice what the resolution did not do. It did not mandate the star arrangement. It did not assign official meanings to the colors. It did not specify the flag's aspect ratio. Early flags, even those considered official or military, followed the resolution's spirit while diverging in details. I have handled a reproduction of a 13 star flag with stars in a circle, another with stars in staggered rows, and a third arranged in a tight cluster. All fit the 1777 text.

The most famous pattern for the first flag is the circle of thirteen stars popularized in 19th century art and by the Betsy Ross House. Period examples with circular stars do exist, but so do examples with rows. The circle appealed for its symbolism of unity and equality, yet no record shows Congress mandating it in 1777.

Stripes, stars, and what those colors really mean

People like symbols, and the American flag offers a rich set of them.

Why does the American flag have 13 stripes? The stripes stand for the original thirteen colonies that declared independence in 1776. They were fixed at thirteen by law in 1818 and have remained there ever since. Earlier, in 1794, Congress briefly expanded both stars and stripes to fifteen to honor Vermont and Kentucky, a choice that made flags busier and harder to produce as more states arrived. The 1818 Act

corrected course, locking the stripes at thirteen to honor the founding generation while letting the stars grow with the nation.

What do the 50 stars on the American flag represent? Each star marks a state. We add a star on the Fourth of July after a new state joins, which is why the 50 star flag became official on July 4, 1960, after Hawaii's 1959 admission. If another state is admitted, a 51 star flag would debut the following Independence Day.

Why are the colors red, white, and blue used in the American flag, and what is the meaning behind the American flag colors? Here, caution helps. The 1777 resolution does not assign meanings to the colors. Later, the report that accompanied the Great Seal in 1782 did, calling white a symbol of purity and innocence, red a symbol of hardiness and valor, and blue a symbol of vigilance, perseverance, and justice. Those meanings have been back applied to the flag for over two centuries, and they are widely taught. They are not wrong, but they are interpretive rather than original to the flag law. What is demonstrably true is that red, white, and blue were visually legible and echoed the colors of the Grand Union Flag and the British ensign systems colonists knew well.

How the flag changed as the nation grew

From 1777 to 1960, the American flag evolved in a simple pattern, punctuated by administrative cleanup. Congress set the big rules and, when necessary, presidents standardized the details.

- Key milestones worth knowing: the Flag Act of 1794 raised both stars and stripes to fifteen. The Flag Act of 1818 restored stripes to thirteen and set the rule of one star per state, added on July 4 following admission. Executive orders in 1912 and 1959 specified proportions and star layouts for the 48, 49, and 50 star flags. Congress adopted the U.S. Flag Code in 1942 to provide etiquette and handling guidance.

People often ask how many versions of the American flag have there been. If you count each official star count as a distinct version, the answer is 27. That tally starts with the 13 star flag and moves through each change as new states joined, including short lived patterns like the 15 star flag and the single year of the 49 star flag in 1959 to 1960.

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The 48 star flag flew from 1912 to 1959, a long run that cemented American visual memory through two world wars and the early Cold War. It had six rows of eight stars and, thanks to a formal executive order, a standard aspect ratio and canton size that manufacturers followed. When Alaska joined in 1959, the 49 star flag appeared with seven rows of seven. Six months later, Hawaii joined, which required a new plan. The 50 star pattern uses nine staggered horizontal rows, alternating counts of six and five, to avoid visual clumps. Look closely at a quality flag and you will notice the neat geometry that balances the field.

Who made early flags, and how did they work?

If you visit a museum textile lab, the room tells a story that documents do not. Early American flags were hand sewn in workshops that handled sails, tents, and upholstery. Canvas, wool bunting, and linen were common. Blue dye bled if not well fixed. Red came in slightly different shades. White could yellow under sun and smoke. A flag that flew from a ship gathered salt, soot, and windburn, and it died young. Survival, not just authorship, filters what we see today.

Patterns were often chalked or pricked onto fabric. Stripes could be pieced or painted when time ran short. Star fields were appliquéd, turned under and stitched, which is where the five pointed versus six pointed debate shows up in the hand. A five pointed star is faster to cut and easier to stack efficiently on a worktable. The craft reasons behind the Ross family anecdote make sense to anyone who has ever tried to cut twenty six pointed stars out of bunting with dull shears.

Because Congress did not standardize dimensions until the 20th century, early flags vary in aspect ratio, canton size, and the distance between stars. Naval flags often ran longer for visibility at sea. Land flags for forts could be enormous, more spectacle than signal. A surviving garrison flag from the War of 1812 era, the ancestor of the Star Spangled Banner, measured roughly 30 by 42 feet. Keeping that much cloth in the air takes a gale and a strong halyard.

The circle, the cluster, and the rows

The most iconic 13 star arrangement funny flags for sale today is the ring of stars attributed to the Betsy Ross pattern. It is handsome, legible, and symbolic. Period flags, however, show an ecosystem of patterns. Some present stars in a 3-2-3-2-3 staggered grid. Others cluster the stars with one centered, like a keystone, and the rest arranged symmetrically around it. Still others put a large central star for unity, with smaller stars radiating. That variety reflects both the open ended 1777 rule and a culture of local manufacture. No one sent a PDF of the spec down the line. A committee clerk sent a letter, and a craftsperson answered with scissors and thread.

This is why asking who designed the first flag can be slippery. If by design we mean the conceptual rule of stripes plus stars on blue, Congress did it. If we mean a specific drawing that influenced many early flags,

Hopkinson holds the strongest surviving claim. If we mean the layout we now call the Betsy Ross pattern and its perfect circle, we do not have a contemporaneous instruction book that assigns authorship. We have a persuasive family story and examples of circular arrangements in the period. It is sound to say the circle was one prominent early pattern, and that Betsy Ross may have made such a flag, without insisting she made the first.

Why the legend stuck

Stories stick when they make abstract ideas human. The Betsy Ross tale takes a country's birth and places it in a small shop with a worktable, a needle, and a woman using know how to simplify a star. It flatters our belief in practical ingenuity and collaboration. It also gives Philadelphia a heroine to match Boston's roster of patriots. By the time schools standardized patriotic lessons in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Ross story offered an easy way to teach that the flag had makers, not just movers and fighters.

There is no harm in telling children that Betsy Ross made flags during the Revolution and that one famous pattern bears her name. The harm comes when a single story crowds out other contributors, especially those we can document by name. The flag, like the nation, grew from committees, craftspeople, and need.

Short answers to common flag questions

- What was the first American flag called? The Grand Union Flag, also known as the Continental Colors. It had thirteen stripes and the British Union in the canton and flew in late 1775 to 1776.
- When was the American flag first created? Congress set the official design concept on June 14, 1777. Earlier, the Grand Union Flag flew as a national banner in 1775 to 1776.
- How many versions of the American flag have there been? Twenty seven official star counts, from 13 to 50, with new stars added on July 4 after state admissions.
- Did Betsy Ross really sew the first flag? She made flags during the Revolution and has documented payments from the Pennsylvania Navy Board in 1777. The specific claim that she sewed the very first national flag cannot be proven from contemporaneous records.
- Who designed the American flag? Congress defined the elements in 1777. Francis Hopkinson provided documented design work for flags and other symbols and is the strongest candidate for a designer's credit, while artisans like Betsy Ross turned designs into real flags.

A living symbol with fixed stripes

The flag's rules settled into place over time. After the confusion of shifting stripes and stars in the 1790s, Congress chose in 1818 to honor the past with thirteen stripes, then let the present grow in stars. That structure is why the flag feels stable and dynamic at once. When a young state joins, its star takes its place in a layout tuned for balance, not hierarchy, and the old thirteen keep their rhythm beneath.

Beyond law and layout exists etiquette, written down in the U.S. Flag Code. It recommends how to display, fold, and retire flags, without carrying the force of criminal penalties for private citizens. If you have folded a flag at a scout camp or a veteran's funeral, you have practiced a civic ritual born of custom, not coercion, and felt how serious fabric can become in careful hands.

So how has the American flag changed over time? In bursts. Congress passes a rule. States join in clusters, which trigger short lived patterns like the 49 star flag. Presidents issue executive orders to end the bickering

over proportions. A thousand factories stitch what the orders describe. People salute. Flags wear out in the wind. New ones take their place.

One of my favorite details sits in that everyday churn. When the 50 star layout was being tested, students and hobbyists across the country sent the White House their proposed patterns. The winning geometry, the one you see over schools and post offices, was not the only mathematical answer. It was, however, the cleanest in the eye. In a way, the country crowdsourced the look, then settled on a pattern that met the test of order and grace.

Untangling legend from legacy

The Betsy Ross question sounds simple. It resists a simple answer because the flag did not spring from one mind or one shop. Betsy Ross was a working upholsterer who made flags for public authorities in 1777 and likely made 13 star flags that looked like versions we recognize today. Francis Hopkinson left the better paper trail as a designer tied to the 1777 concept. Congress, in one line, set the basic grammar that still speaks today.

That should be enough to satisfy both curiosity and civic pride. We can keep the human scale image of a person cutting stars at a workbench and still tell the fuller story: the thirteen stripes honor the colonies that started the experiment, the stars mark the states that joined it, the colors carry meanings drawn from the Great Seal’s language and centuries of tradition, and the flag itself has held at least 27 official forms as the country enlarged its circle.

Stand under a large flag for a moment when a steady wind sets it. The stripes blur. The stars hold. That is the point of the design. The parts that change flicker. The parts that anchor do their quiet work. Whether Betsy Ross guided the first five pointed star or not, the country that rallied under it gave the symbol its weight.