Figure 1. "The Spirit of '76" by Tompkin Mattison. (All items pictured in this article are from the collection of the author.)

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U.S. Stars and Stripes

Robert D. (Bob) Palmer

As I stand here addressing the American Society of Arms Collectors, the first question to be answered is, "Why flags? This is an arms and armor related organization."

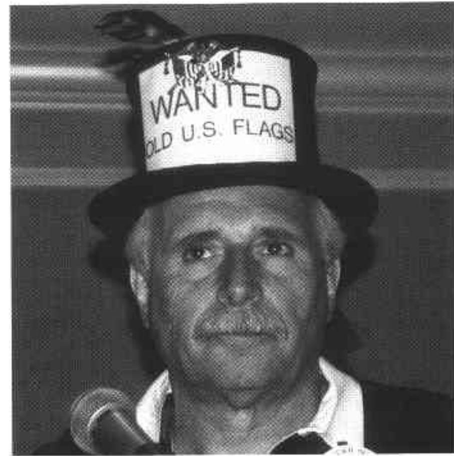
Under Objectives, Article IIA, of the ASAC constitution is stated, and I quote, "to establish a permanent national organization and promote friendship for those interested in the collection and preservation of arms, armor, and accessories by responsible collectors."

It is hard to think of an accessory more related to arms and armor than a national flag. Virtually every portrait of a battle includes one or more flags flying in the background, or, it is the bold subject of the artist, as in this painting by Tompkin Mattison (Figure 1), which we are all familiar with from childhood, "The Spirit of '76."

The second question might be, "How does one get interested in flag collecting?" When I was 8 years old, my grandmother gave me this 39-star flag (Figure 2) with the understanding I was never to trade it away or dispose of it in any manner. It was a flag she had waved in a parade when she was a young girl. In the corner, you can make out the date July 4, 1888, has been written on the reverse and shows through the silk fabric (more on this flag later). Also, my mother took great pride in raising the flag in front of my folks' retirement home in Florida every morning and ceremoniously taking it down every evening. Upon her death I decided to continue the practice and have since developed a personal pride and interest in our flag.

As we all know, it is getting harder and harder to add good pieces to our arms collections, and I decided to keep my eyes open at gun shows and flea markets for flags as well as pieces for my pistol collection, and it all snowballed from there.

Before I continue, I need to state my purpose. This is not to be a scholarly presentation of minute detail, but is meant to pass on some, I feel, interesting bits of information about our flag that I have picked up over the past few years and to dispel a few incorrect myths along the way. I could get into a discussion of the different methods of printing flags over the years, and the implications of zig-zag stitching as opposed to straight-line machine sewing versus hand sewing. A more in-depth discussion would include types of grommets used, an explanation of and dating of single-ply and double-ply weft and warp yarns, and on and on. All of this is



extremely important to the collector in properly dating period flags, especially in light of the fact that many precentennial flags were altered during the centennial to exemplify our earlier flags. There are quite a few examples of flags in which the canton or union is from one period and the stripes or field is from another period. I fear, however, that further discussion along this line would encourage a mass movement to the coffee urn and beyond.

In addition, in no way do I intend to butt heads with Howie Maddis, whom I have found in corresponding with fellow vexiligists (that's long for "flag nuts") that he is considered the real guru of the flag world.

To start before the beginning, the truest parent of our Stars and Stripe was a flag of 13 red and white alternating stripes with the British Union in the canton (Figure 3). It was born between the hostilities at Lexington and Concord and the Declaration of Independence. The 13 stripes represented the colonies, unified and aggrieved, the union demonstrating that the colonists were still loyal subjects of King George.[1]

An interesting sidenote is the creation of the British flag itself. This was a flag whose design would endure in America well into the Revolutionary War. It was created after the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, when the Scottish king, James VI, was asked to take the throne and so became James I of England. To give the ships of the united England and Scotland a proper design, in 1606 James proclaimed "from hence forth all our subjects of these Isles and Kingdom of Great Britain . . . shall bear in their maintop the Red Cross (of England), commonly called the St. George's Cross (Figure 4)

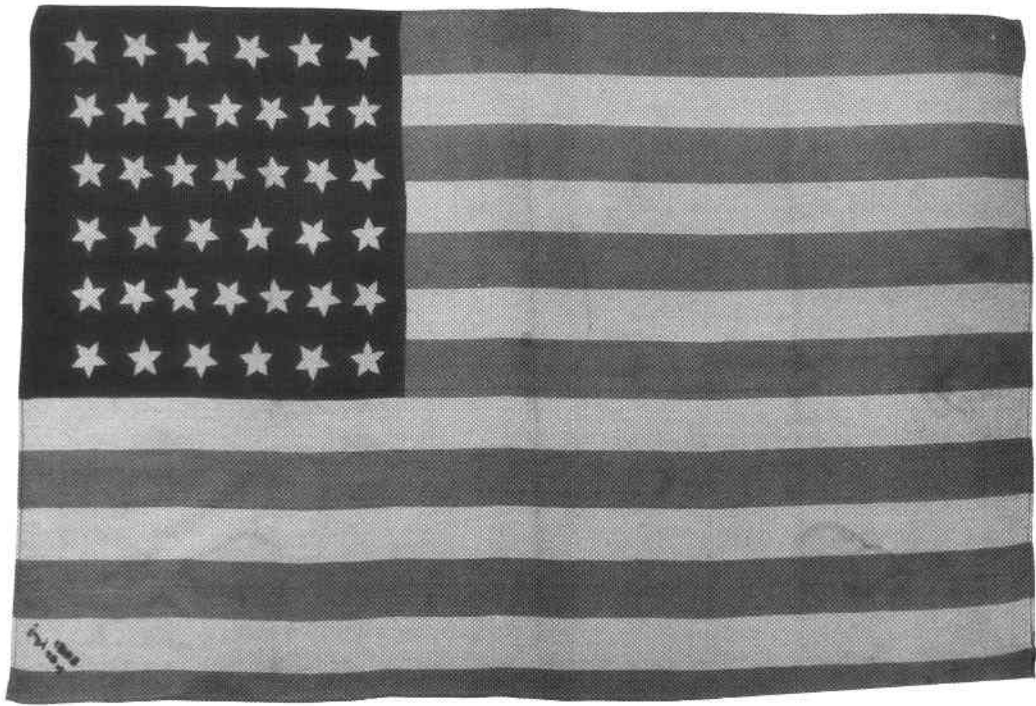


Figure 2. 39-star U.S. flag.

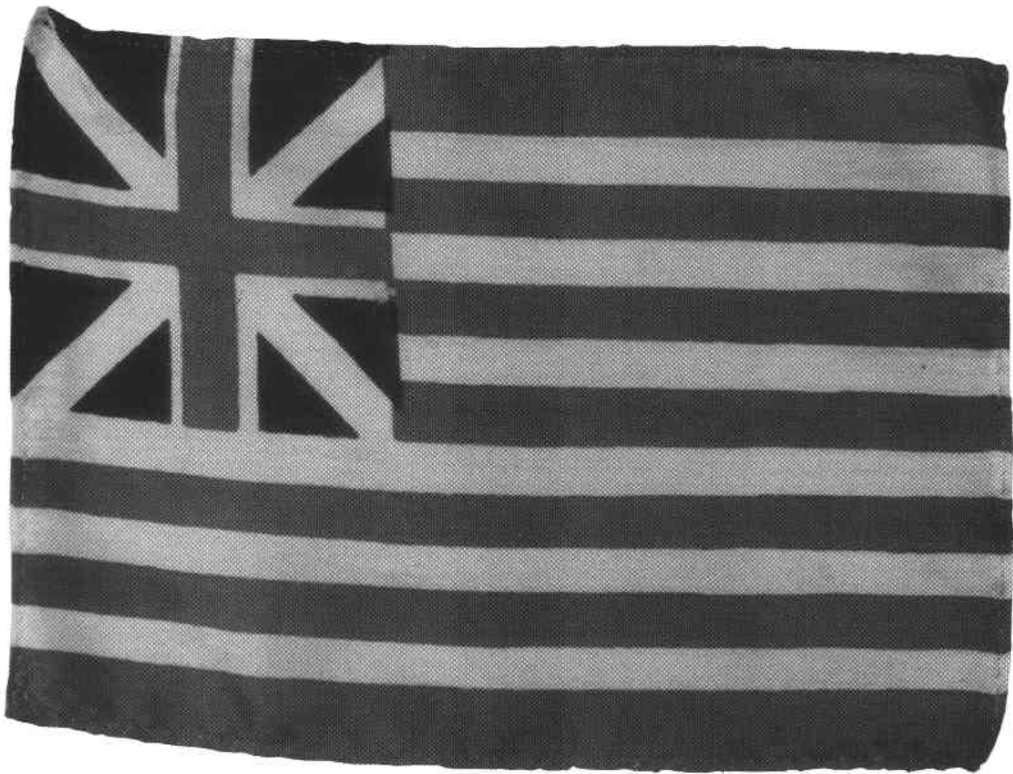


Figure 3. Grand Union flag.

and the White Cross (of Scotland) commonly called the St. Andrew's Cross (Figure 5) joined together" . . ., thus forming the familiar British Union (Figure 6).

In 1625, at James' funeral, this flag was referred to as "the banner of the Union" and became simply the British Union or British flag.[2]

Back to our flag. The colonists declared their independence and announced that "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" were God-given rights of all men, and with the newly created country of the United States of America came a need for its own new flag. The war slowed the process of its development, and it was not until 1777 that the first National

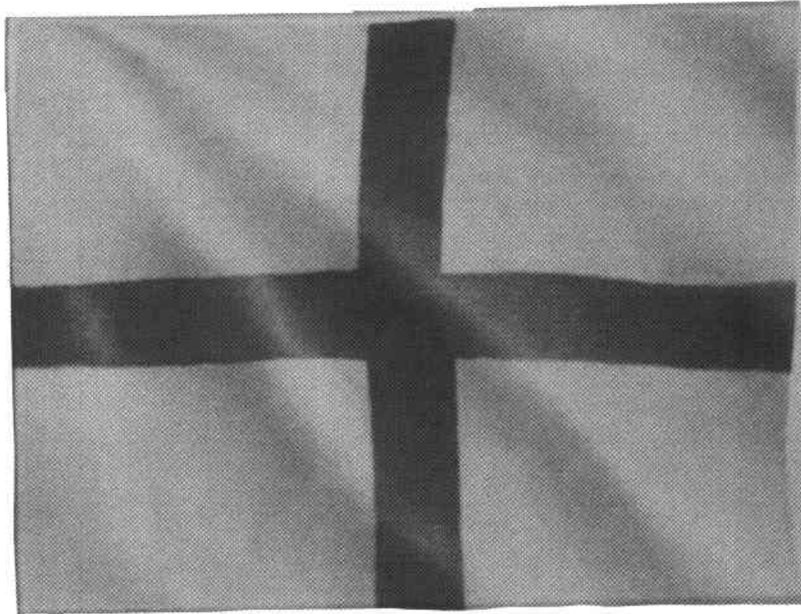


Figure 4. The Red Cross of England: St. George's Cross.

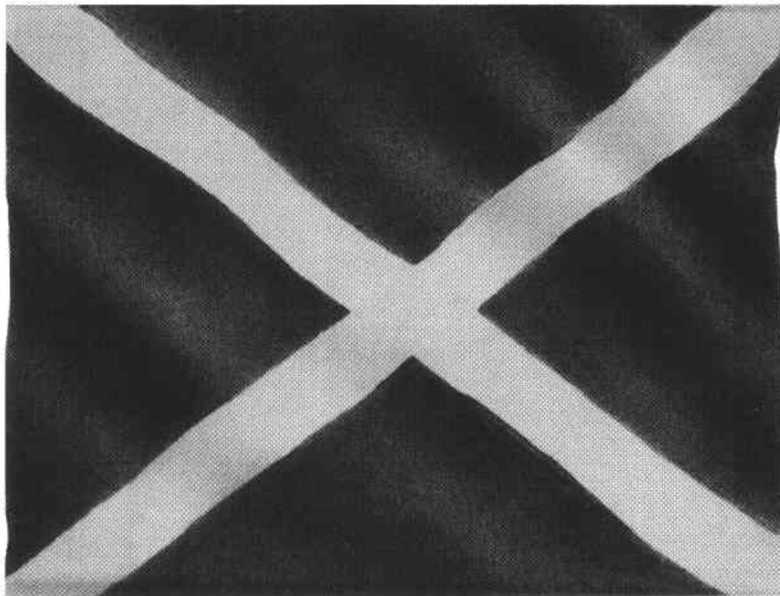


Figure 5. The White Cross of Scotland: St. Andrew's Cross.

Flag Act was passed on June 14, stating "Resolved that the flag of the thirteen United States be thirteen stripes alternate red and white: that the union be thirteen stars, white on a blue field representing a new constellation."[3] What was meant by the term "new constellation" no one knows. Neither the Congressional resolution nor any know document of the time mentions the arrangement of the stars, or for that matter, why stars were even selected.

Most of us grew up with the notion that Betsy Ross helped design and did make the first Stars and Stripes. Pictures such as this 1910 postcard (Figure 7) helped promote and perpetuate this myth. There is no substantive proof of this romantic idea, and it did not even exist until almost 100 years after the supposed act occurred when, in 1870, William J. Canby, Betsy's grandson, read a paper to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania stating that General Washington and two additional representatives from congress met "in her back parlor" where she was asked to make a flag based on a sketch they had with them. The sketch showed six printed stars, and Canby related that his grandmother suggested they be reduced to five points. This was to have happened somewhere around June 1, 1776, according to Canby, who knew Washington had visited Philadelphia at that time. However, it makes little sense that a national flag would be designed a month before there even existed a United States and that it should include exactly thirteen stars

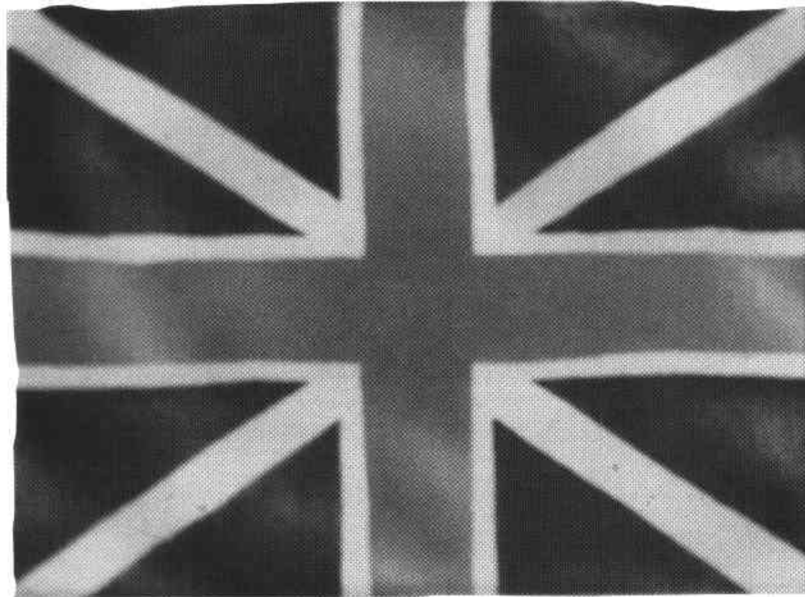


Figure 6. The Banner of the Union or British Union flag.

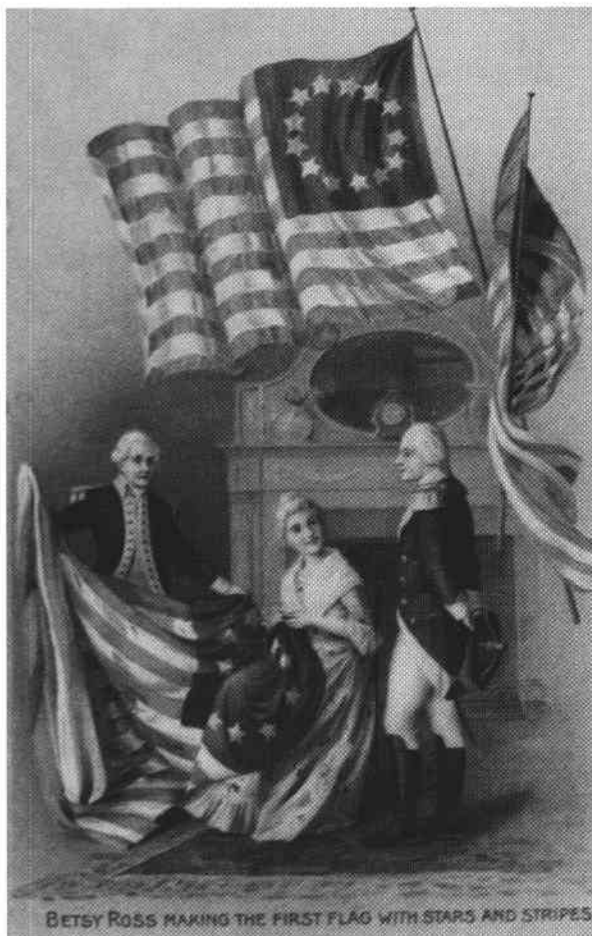


Figure 7. Postcard dating from 1910.

when the exact number of colonies to revolt and unite was not exactly known yet.[4]

Betsy is known to have made and been paid for making ships' colors in 1777. I believe Howie Maddis has an example or two, but no evidence of her making the now-famous flag exists, and there is no mention in Congressional records or Washington's personal accounts of any such meeting having taken place.

Ship colors or naval ensigns of this 13-star pattern (Figure 8) were used in the later 18th century and well into the 19th century, thus creating even more confusion of the dating of 13-star flags.

When I first ran across this little "Betsy Ross" flag (Figure 9) at a flea market, I was very suspicious of its authenticity. It is very skillfully hand sewn and embroidered in silk, and on the heading is handwritten, "Made by Sarah M. Wilson, Great Granddaughter of Betsy Ross." On the reverse is written, "Displayed in the East Wing of Independence Hall, Oct. 9, 1910."

Contacting the historian at Independence Hall revealed such items were put on display at about that time, but this exact flag could not be positively identified. In correspondence with several far more advanced collectors than I, I have learned that several virtually identical flags have been known for years.

Betsy Ross was originally a Grisson (family tree, Figure 10) and was apparently rather tough on her marital partners, as she first married John Ross, and upon his death married Joseph Ashburn and, later on, John Claypoole, with whom she produced a daughter Clarrisa Claypoole, who married a Wilson and had a son Aquilla Bolton Wilson, who married Sarah Groskey, who produced the maker of my little flag, Sarah Markley Wilson. Not absolute proof of its authenticity, but enough things point in that direction to make it a reasonable conclusion.

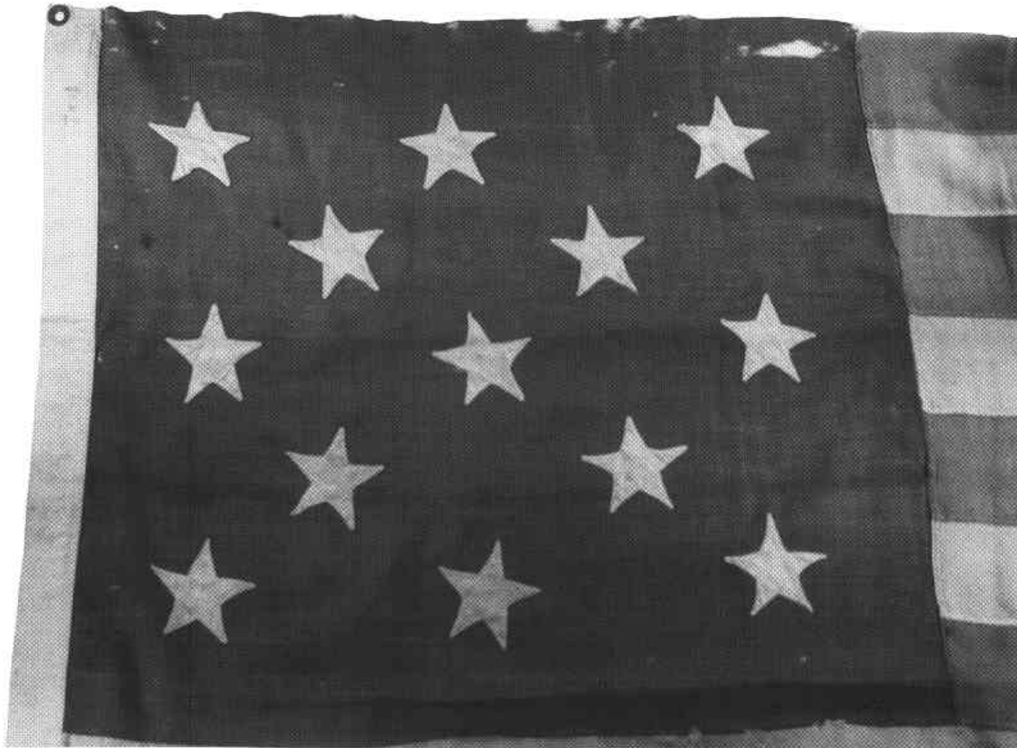


Figure 8. A 13-star Naval ensign.

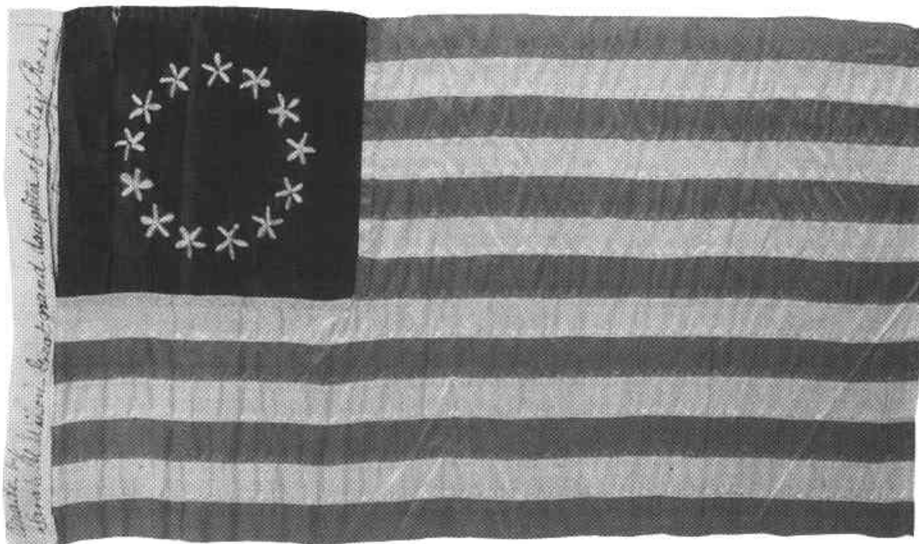


Figure 9. A 13-star "Betsy-Ross" flag made by her great granddaughter.

Back to the possible original designer of the first federal flag. Probably the most legitimate claim is attributed to a Francis Hopkinson, a popular patriot, member of the Continental Congress, signer of the Declaration of Independence, lawyer, poet, and artist. In 1780, upon the Board of Admiralty's acceptance of his design for the board's official seal, he wrote, "I have with great readiness upon several occasions exerted my small abilities in this way for the public service, as I flatter myself, to the satisfaction of those I wish to please, VIZ:

The flag of the United States of America.

Seven devices for the Continental Currency.

A seal for the Board of Treasury.

A Great Seal for the United States of America with a reverse."[5]

For those services he asked for "a quarter cask of the public wine" as "proper and reasonable reward for these labors of fancy and a suitable encouragement to others of the like nature."[6] If this bill had been honored, Betsy Ross would probably not be in the history books, but no payment in wine or any other form was made. He then submitted a more formal bill, in the amount of $7,200, to Congress for payment for the design of the Great Naval flag of the United States (the

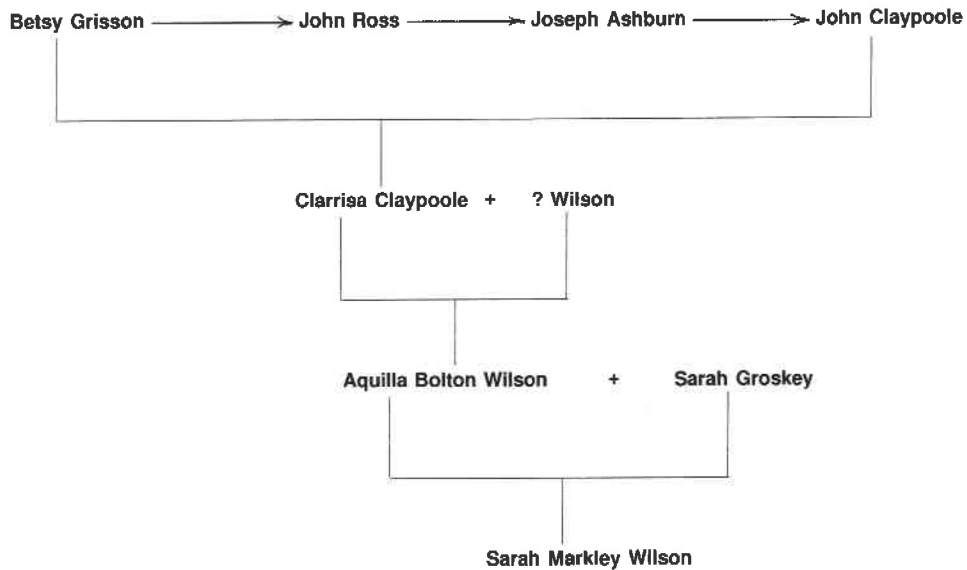


Figure 10. Family tree of Sarah Markley Wilson.

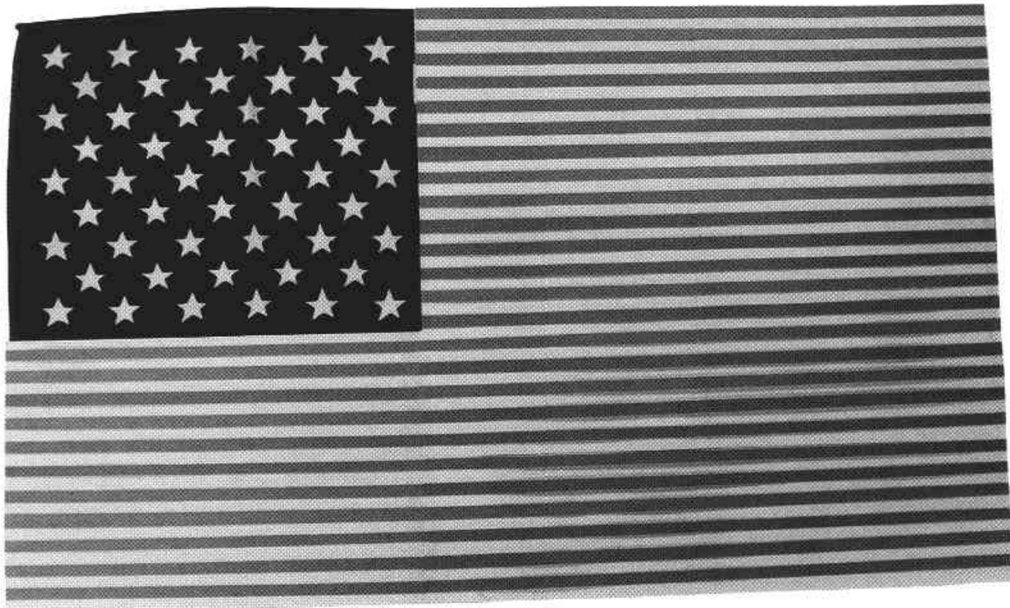


Figure 11. Theoretical interpretation of a 50 star, 50 stripe flag.

Great Naval flag and the National flag are normally considered one and the same in this country).[7] This was kicked around the Treasury Department for 4 months, until October 27, 1780, when payment was refused because Hopkinson "was not the only person consulted on those exhibitions of fancy."[8]

This statement implies Hopkinson's probable connection to the design of the flag but negates the concept he was the sole designer as he claimed. The original designer will probably remain a mystery forever.

With the admission of Vermont to the Union in 1791, and Kentucky in 1792, the question of their representation on the flag was brought before Congress, and a bill dealing with the question became law when President Washington signed the bill on January 13, 1794. The law stated that after May 1795, "the flag of the U.S. be fifteen stripes, alternate red and white: and that the Union be fifteen stars, white in a blue field"[9]—again, no mention of how the stars should be arranged.

Those of you that attended the McLean, Virginia, meeting and toured the Smithsonian probably saw the Star Spangled Banner of 15 stars that flew over Fort McHenry during the war of 1812. To date, I have not been able to acquire a period 15-star flag and probably never will, as they are quite scarce.

Tennessee (no. 16 in 1796), Ohio (no. 17 in 1803), Louisiana (no. 18 in 1812), Indiana (no. 19 in 1816), and Mississippi (no. 20 in 1817) all received admission into the

Union with no formal recognition being made in the flag. Had the third flag act of 1818 not been passed, the flag would have developed into a confusing barber pole-like banner with ever increasing numbers of stripes as well as stars. There is known to be an 18-star, 18-stripe flag now in Baton Rouge that was made to celebrate Louisiana's admission in to the union.

To illustrate the confused appearance that would have developed had we continued the stripe ascension, I have taken a typical current example of our 50-star flag and placed over it 50 alternating red and white stripes (Figure 11). Not only does it become ridiculous, the bottom of the flag is basically undefined because it would end in a white stripe.

A change was obviously needed and was anticipated by Congressman Peter H. Wendover of New York, who asked to have a committee appointed to look into the problem. Such a committee was appointed, but little was accomplished before the Congress adjourned just 2 months later. However, during this time, Wendover approached Captain Samuel Chester Reid, U.S.N., a hero of the War of 1812, to design a flag that would allow for the increase of the number of states without destroying the distinctive character of the flag.

Reid suggested the stripes be reduced to 13 for the original states and the stars of all existing states be joined in forming one single star, giving meaning to our national motto, *E Pluribus Unum* [one out of many].[10] The commit-

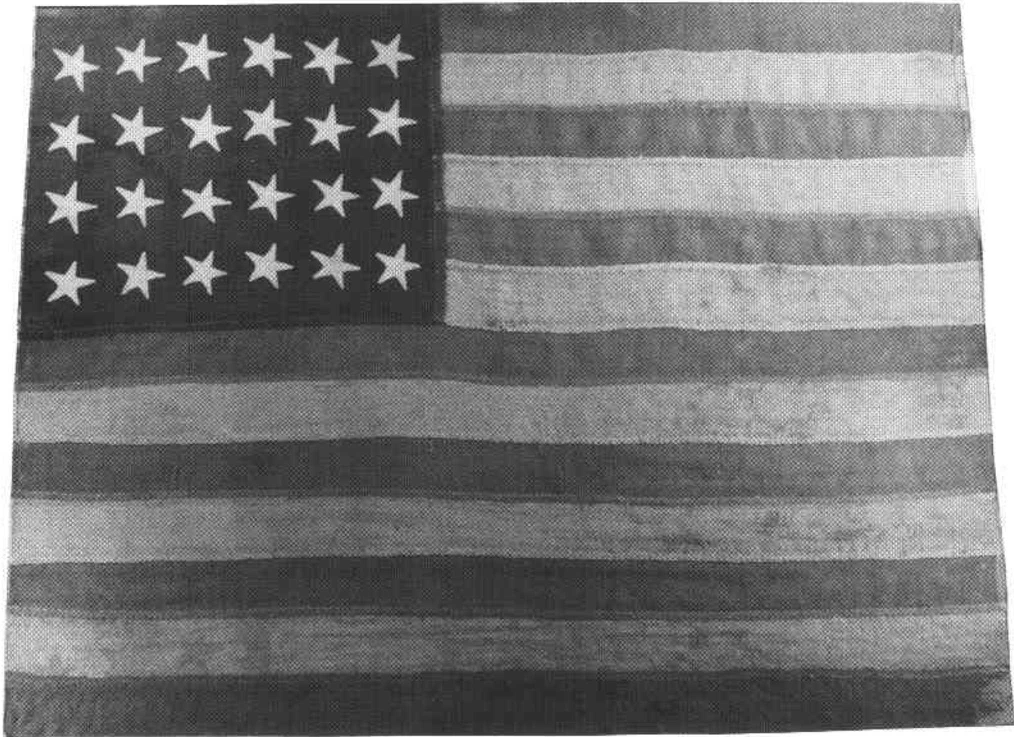


Figure 12. A 24-star U.S. flag.

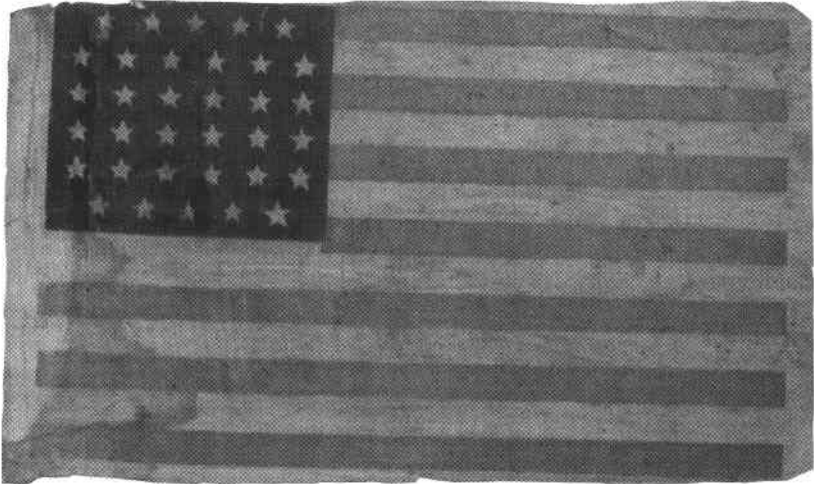


Figure 13. A 34-star U.S. flag printed for patriotic use.

tee liked his suggestion and adopted it, but Congress failed to pass it in January 1817. In December of that year, Wendover tried again, pointing out that the general use of the flag varied all over the place and seldom adhered to the act of 1794. In fact, he pointed out that the building in which they sat had a flag of but nine stars, while the one at the Naval yard had 18.[11] A new committee was appointed. A new bill came before the House on January 6, 1818, in which were much of the same suggestions as Reid's, except no mention of forming a great star out of the states' stars was made. The bill was passed on March 31 and signed by President Monroe on April 4, 1818. It reduced the stripes back to 13 and stated in Section 2, "And be it further enacted that as the admission of every state into the union one star be added to the union of the flag; and that such addition shall take effect on the fourth of July next succeeding such admission."[12]

Thus the 20 star flag became official on July 4, 1818, but flew just 1 year when the 21st was added for Illinois. During

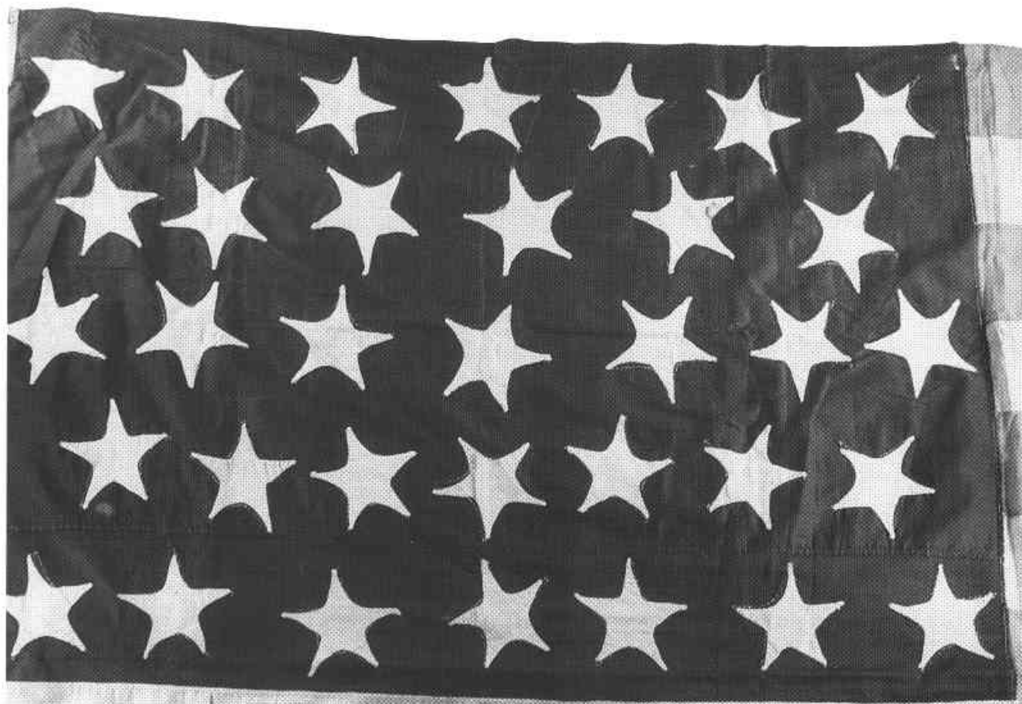


Figure 14. A 34-star hand-sewn U.S. flag.

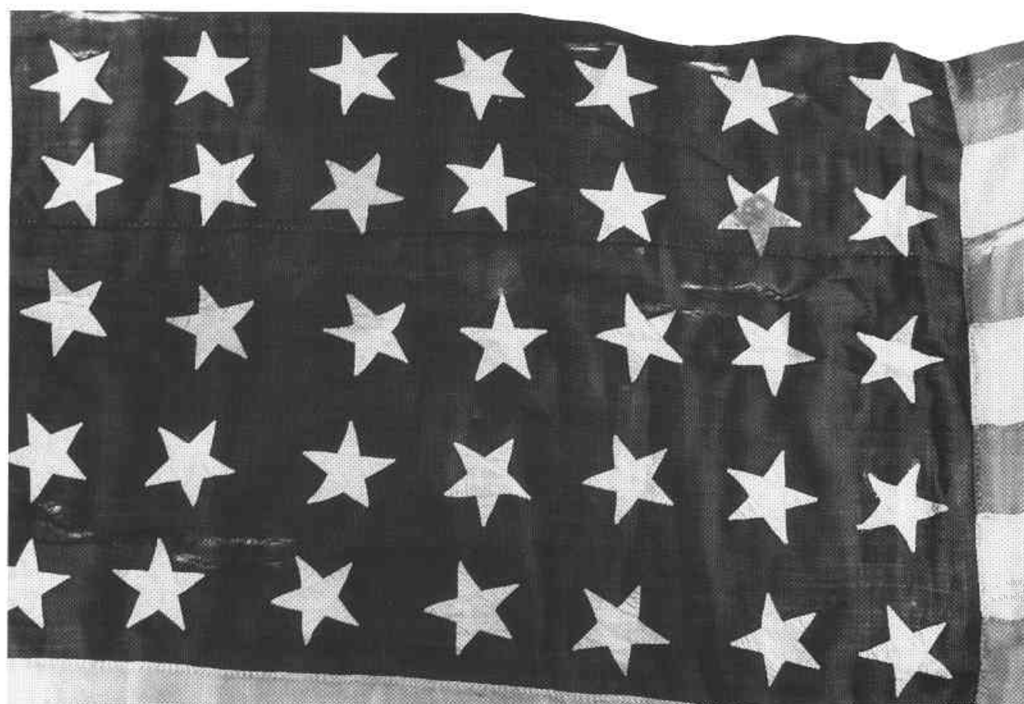


Figure 15. A 35-star U.S. flag.

the following year both Alabama and Maine were admitted into the Union, and the flag officially jumped to 23 stars.

From this flag all the way to the 38-star flag of 1876, the flag grew one star at a time making 16 different flags with ever-increasing stars.

I was fortunate to acquire, from fellow member Don Upchurch, this 24-star flag (Figure 12), which is the oldest period flag in my collection. It was the result of Missouri's admission in 1822 and flew until 1836, when Arkansas was admitted to the Union.

An interesting sidenote on this flag concerns a Captain William Driver, Commander of the ship Charles Doggett of Salem, Massachusetts. Before leaving for a world-wide voyage in 1831, friends presented him with a beautiful flag of 24 stars. As the banner opened to the ocean breeze for the first time, he exclaimed: "Old Glory!"[13] This became a personal

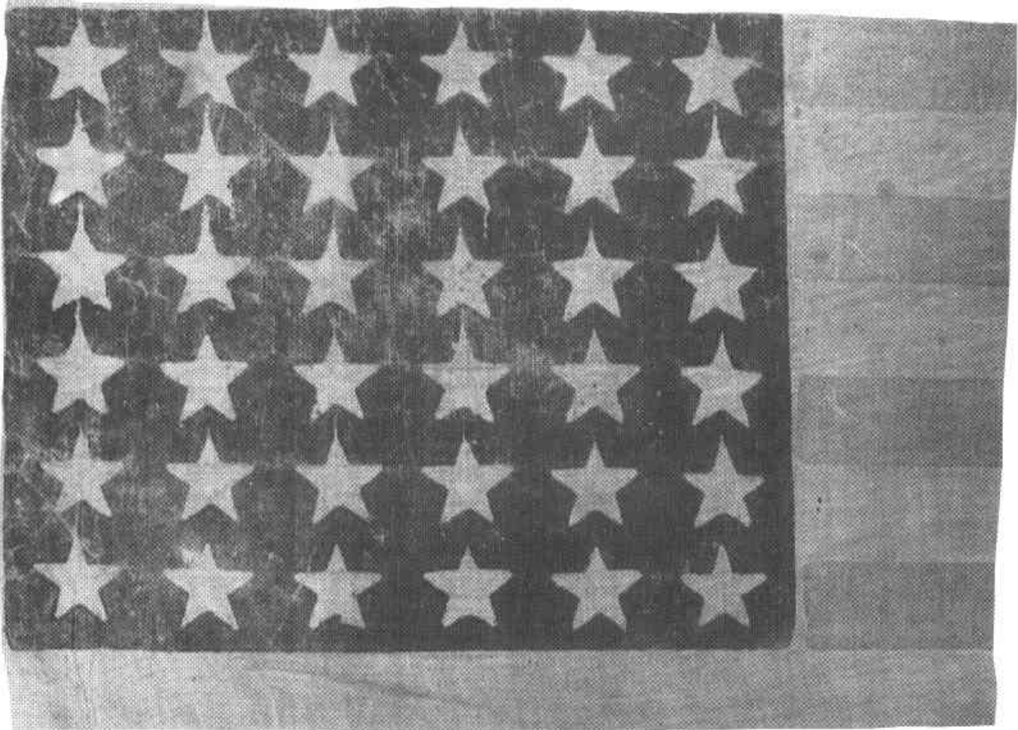


Figure 16. A 36-star U.S. flag.

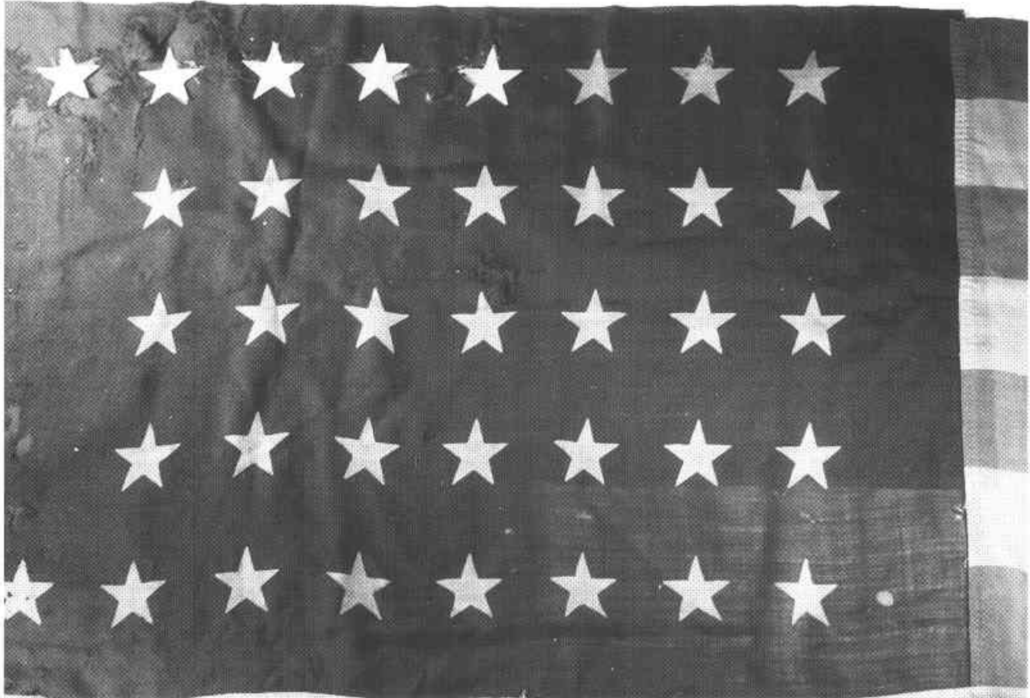


Figure 17. A 37-star U.S. flag—Regimental pattern.

pet name for his flag, which he used from then on. Driver retired to Nashville, Tennessee, carrying with him his precious flag. When Tennessee seceded from the Union, Driver hid his flag by sewing it inside his bed cover where it remained safely until early 1862, when Union troops marched in to Nashville after a successful campaign for control of the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. In the company of a Union officer, Driver retrieved his flag and raised it above the state capital. This deed, his praise of Old Glory, and the subsequent publicity gave the nation another name for its flag.[14]

Another point of interest on this flag is that the canton, or union, only comes down six stripes and rests upon the seventh, which is red and sometimes referred to as the blood stripe. The Act of 1818 called for the union to be seven thirteenths of the height of the hoist, or side, of the flag. This would require the union to come down seven stripes and rest

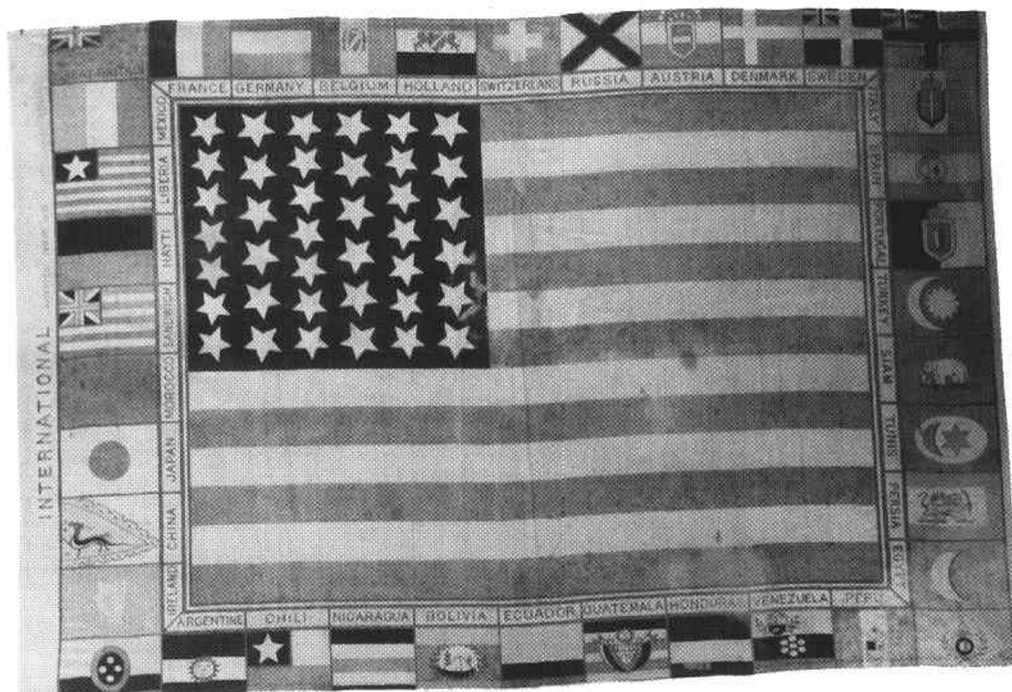


Figure 18. U.S. Centennial flag—1876.

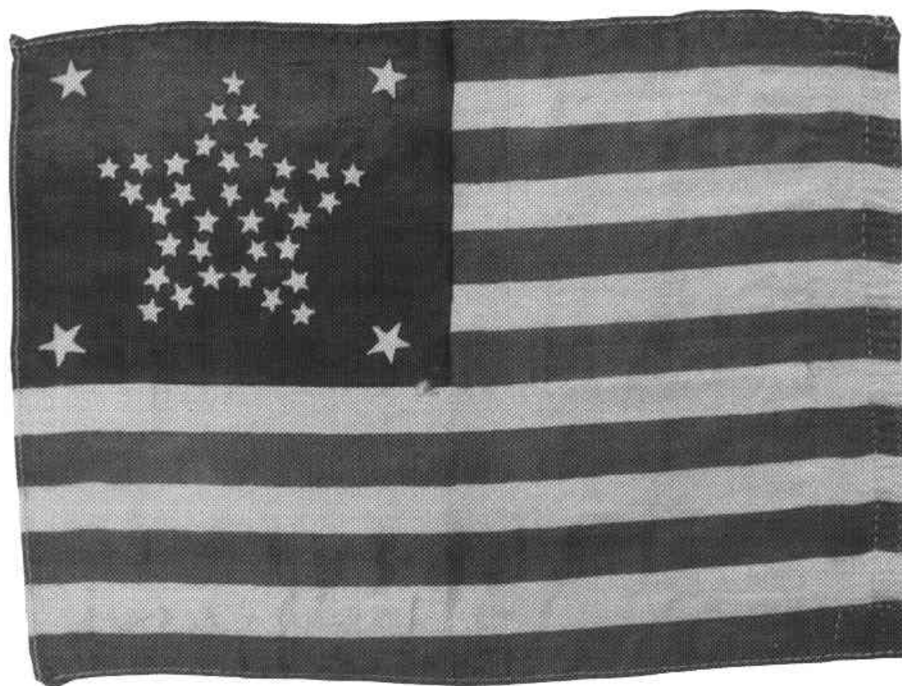


Figure 19. A 37-star Great Star flag.

on the eighth, a white one. Legend has it that the canton resting on the blood stripe indicates the country was at war when the flag was made. Virtually every flag with a canton on the blood stripe that I have encountered was made during peace time. I have yet to find one that supports the story.

The first Civil War flag was of 33 stars and flew for 2 years from July 4, 1859, to July 4, 1861, when Kansas raised it to 34 (Figure 13). Note the ingenuity of the maker of this handmade flag in an attempt to maintain symmetry (Figure 14). This also lasted just 2 years until West Virginia was

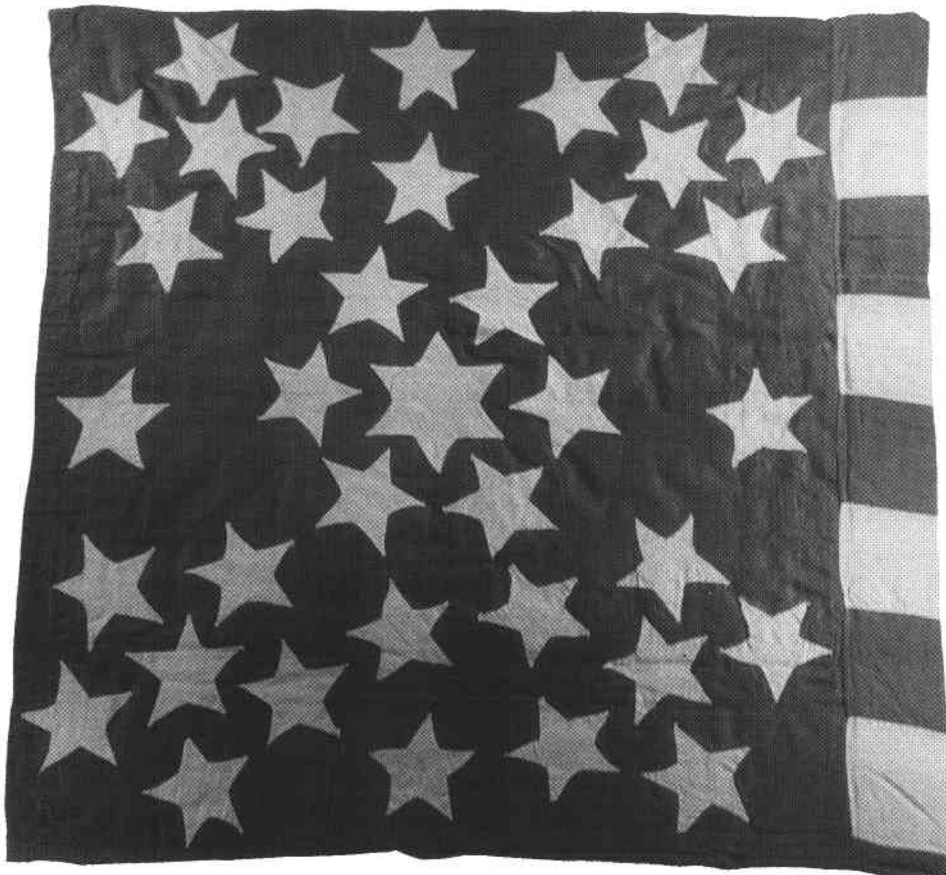


Figure 20. A 37-star Great Flower flag.

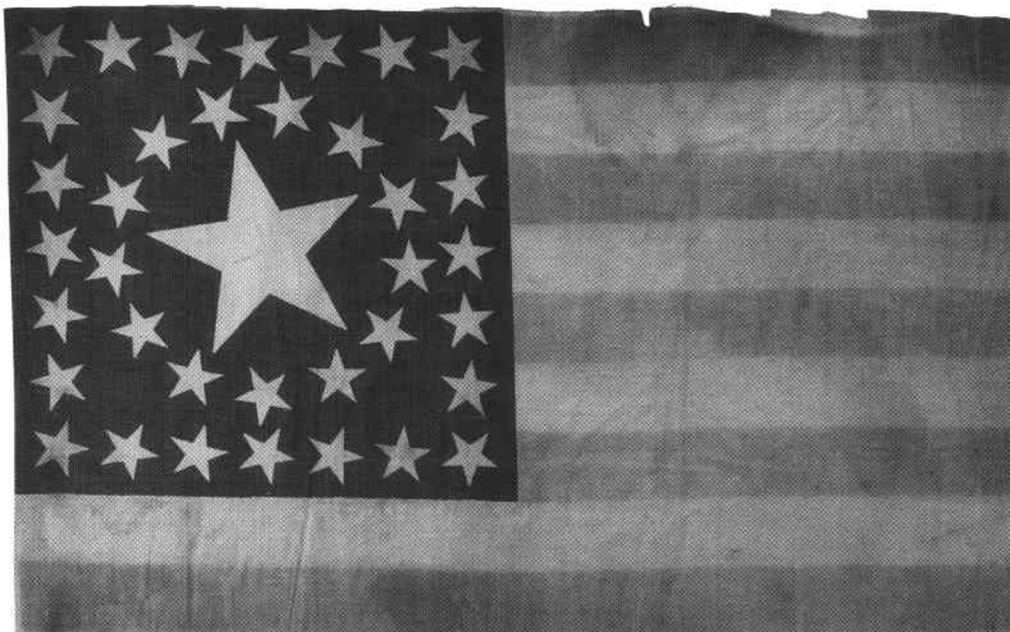


Figure 21. Colorado 38-star Centennial flag.

admitted in June of 1863, leading to the 35-star flag (Figure 15).

There is a bit of confusion about the 36-star flag (Figure 16). Several dealers recently have referred to this as a Civil War flag, but collectors do not consider it as such. Nevada was admitted to the union on October 31, 1864, so it was correctly a Civil War state, but since the 1818 flag act required the flag to change on July 4, and the war was over April 9, 1865, the official 36-star flag was not adopted until after the war. It would seem logical that some 36 star flags were prematurely carried in the war, but adequate authentification would be necessary to call a 36-star flag a true Civil War flag.

This flag flew but 1 year, and then came Nebraska, no. 37 (Figure 17), which lasted 10 years until Colorado was admitted on August 1, 1876, becoming the 38th star.

Because there was still no established arrangement for the stars, and because interest in the flag and a patriotic feeling grew greatly in anticipation of the country's centennial, flags of many designs, patterns, and star numbers appeared during this period. This example (Figure 18), actually patent dated 1875, not only includes the wrong number of stars, but also sports a border of the flags of all nations that were anticipated to attend the centennial celebration. Close inspection of it will show some surprising design changes in those national flags and also indicates how many countries of that period no longer even exist today.

These following departures from the more regimented

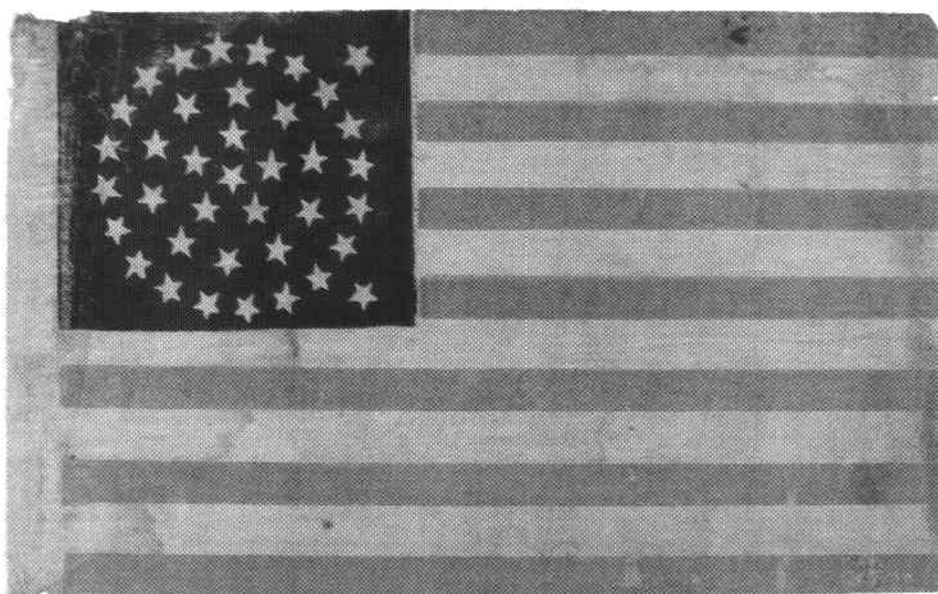


Figure 22. A 38-star flag with circular pattern.

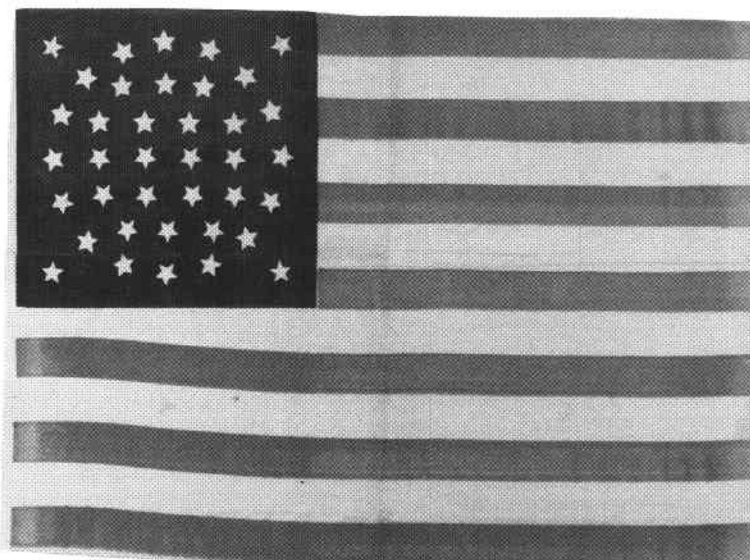


Figure 23. A different 38-star flag with circular pattern.

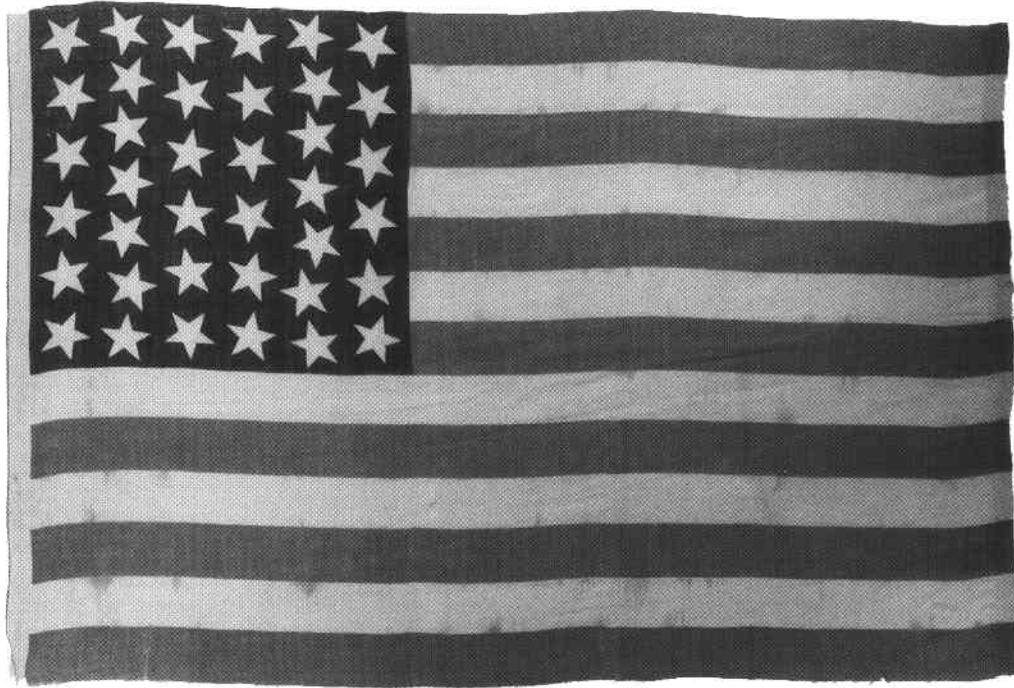


Figure 24. A 38-star flag with random star placement.

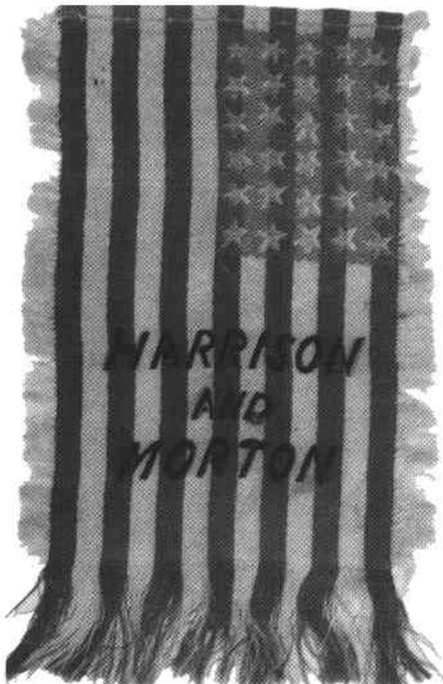


Figure 25. Usage of the U.S. flag for political purposes.

Figure 26. A U.S. Centennial Souvenir flag.

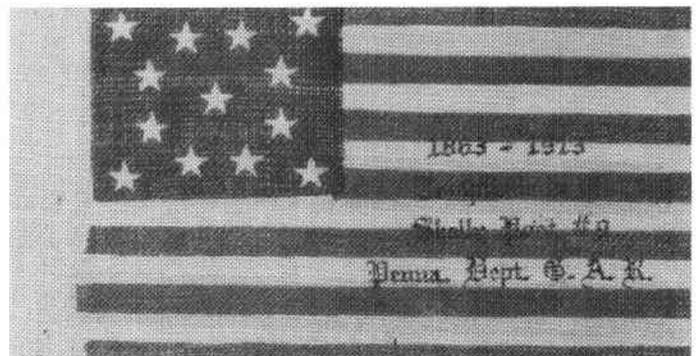


Figure 27. A typical flag issued at G.A.R. reunions.

placement of the stars on conventional flags show a sample of the diversity and beautiful eye appeal of some of the variations. A 37 Great Star (Figure 19); a 37 Great Flower with its central cluster of stars surrounded by petals of stars (Figure 20); a 38-Colorado centennial flag (Figure 21), the large star celebrating its admittance to the union that year with 13 stars around it for the original colonies, the rest for subsequent states; two 38-star variations of a spherical pattern (Figures 22 and 23); and one 38 that appears to be completely disorganized (Figure 24).

Not until 1905 was a law passed restricting the use of the flag for political or commercial use. Here are several examples of such flags. The Harrison-Morton flag (Figure 25)

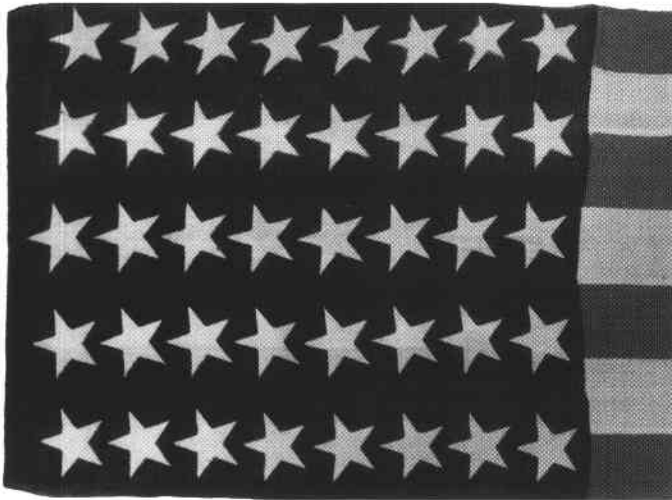


Figure 28. "Outlaw" 40-star U.S. flag.

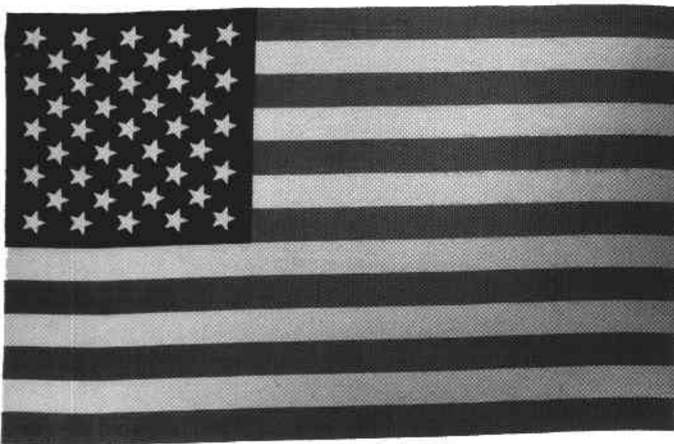


Figure 29. "Outlaw" 41-star U.S. flag.

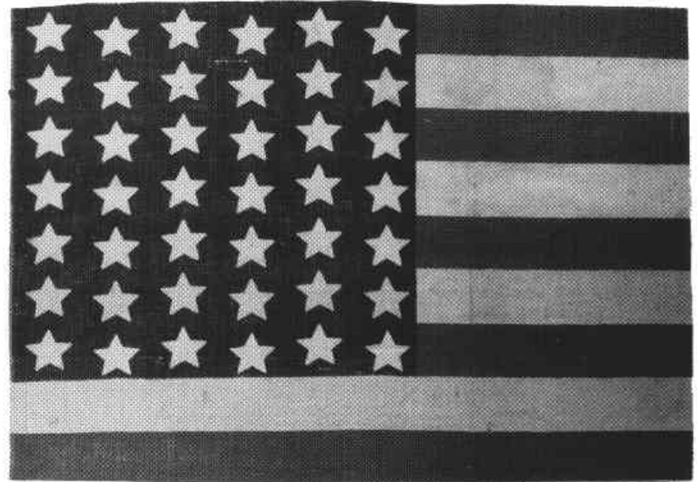


Figure 30. "Outlaw" 42-star U.S. flag.

Figure 31. A 44-star U.S. flag.

dates from their 1888 presidential campaign but sports the wrong number of stars, which was often times the case on such quickly made-up promotional flags. This French-American centennial souvenir flag (Figure 26) incorporates a weaving technique that Hank Truslow, who found it for me, has studied, and I believe he has actually used the process. Many flags such as this one were merely stamped with the event or occasion that prompted its use. G.A.R. flags are a good example of such usage (Figure 27).

From 1877 to 1889, the 38-star flag continued to fly. Then, in 1889, on November 2, North and South Dakota were admitted; 6 days later came Montana and 3 days later, Washington. None of these states would receive recognition on the flag until July 4, 1890, but many overly eager citizens of each state anticipated the admission of their state with their own updated flag.

Examples of these "outlaw" flags include my Grandmother's 39-star for North Dakota (Figure 2), this 40-star for South Dakota (Figure 28) a 41-star for Montana (Figure 29), and a 42-star for Washington (Figure 30). All of these are technically unofficial, and in some cases, rather scarce, but occasionally can still be found on the market.

All seemed set to adopt and display the 42-star flag on July 4, 1890, when congress threw a monkey wrench into the works by admitting Idaho into the Union on July 3, making all 42-star flags incorrect. It is very doubtful that any 43-star flags flew that 4th, or flew at all, because on July 10th Wyoming (no. 44) was admitted to the Union, making it appear futile to acquire a 43-star flag that would soon be obsolete.[15] The government would have been required to fly it for 1 year, but examples of it are very scarce and extremely hard to come by. Hopefully, this presentation will result in one of you remembering you have one up in the attic.

The flag of 44 stars (Figure 31) lasted until 1896, when Utah, no. 45 (Figure 32), was admitted, and it changed again to 46 stars (Figure 33) 12 years later with the admission of Oklahoma. This flag flew but 4 years when in 1912 it jumped to 48 stars with the admission of New Mexico and Arizona. Confusion still existed as to the star pattern, and President William Howard Taft by executive order established the

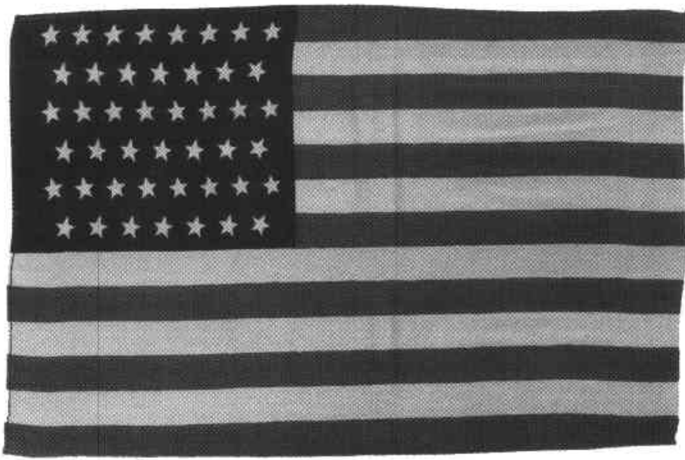


Figure 32. A 45-star U.S. flag.

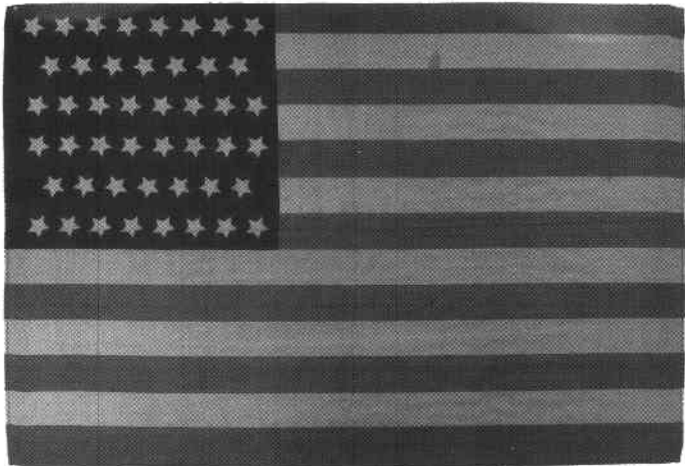


Figure 33. A 46-star U.S. flag.

Figure 34. A 48-star U.S. flag. Convential star pattern.

exact placement and proportions of all design elements of the flag. That pattern (Figure 34) is the one most of us grew up with, but it is not the only one. This staggered 48-star flag (Figure 35) probably predates 1912, again made in anticipation of the change, but before Taft's order.

The 48-star flag had the longest life of any flag, flying

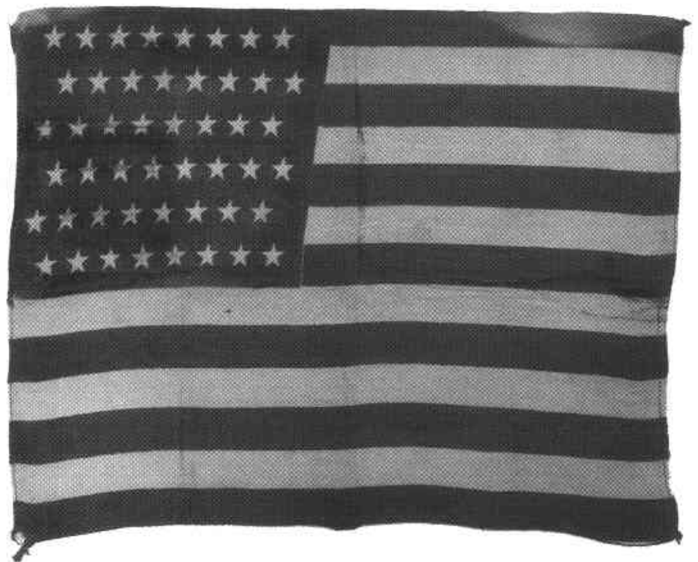


Figure 35. A 48-star U.S. flag. Staggered star pattern.

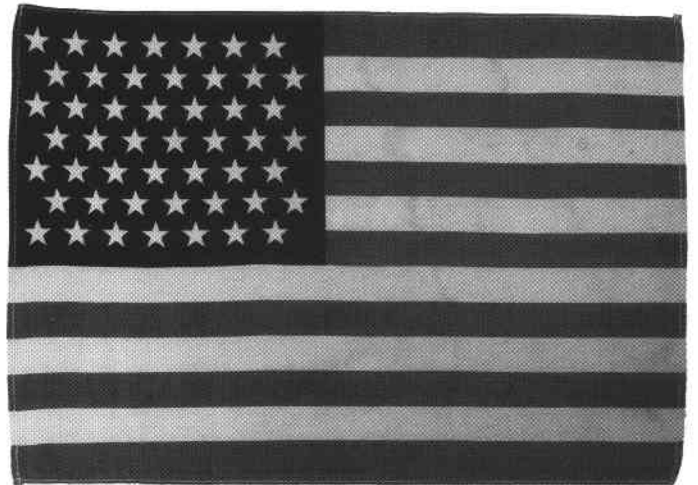


Figure 36. A 49-star U.S. flag.

from 1912 through two world wars and the Korean conflict, and finally was replaced in 1959, when Alaska, no. 49 (Figure 36), was admitted to the Union. Although Hawaii would be admitted just a little more than 7 months later, because the 4th of July fell between the two dates, the 49-star flew for 1 full year until it was replaced in 1960 with our current flag (Figure 37).

In the past 37 years we have had but one intrusion into the 50 star reign, when congress officially adopted this Bicentennial flag (Figure 38) as "official" for celebration purposes during 1976.

This would appear to be a logical place to stop, but I can go one step further. Here is a 51-star flag (Figure 39) that was made up when there was serious talk about admitting Washington, D.C., as a state. With that possibility still existing, and talk of Puerto Rico joining the Union, who knows what our flag will look like in the future?

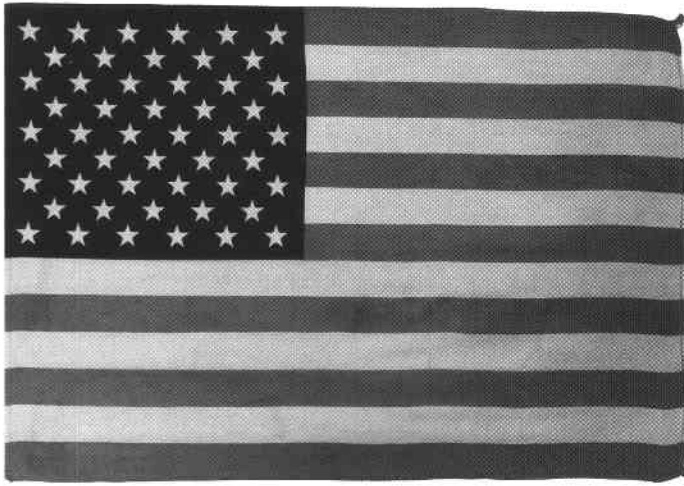


Figure 37. A 50-star U.S. flag.

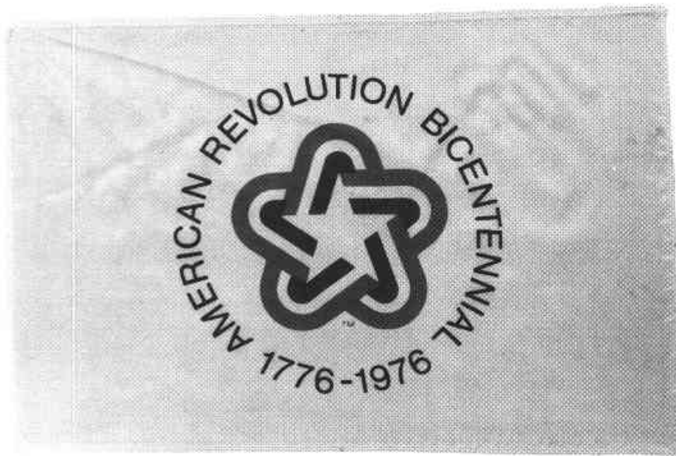


Figure 38. Official Bicentennial flag.

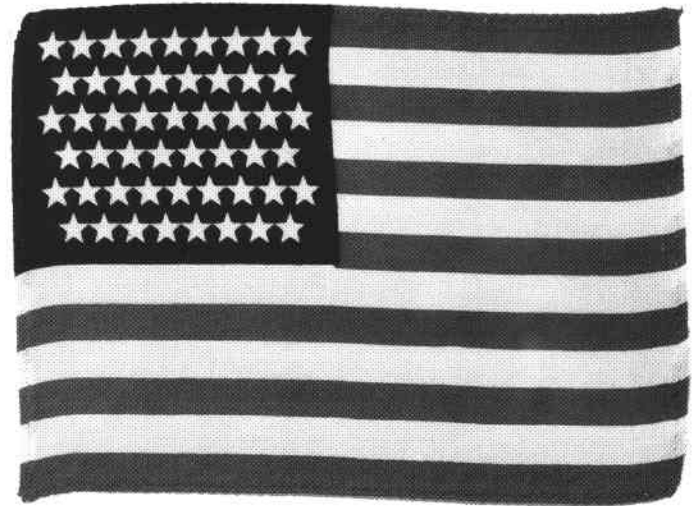


Figure 39. A 51-star U.S. flag printed in anticipation of Washington, D.C., receiving statehood.

NOTES

1. Margaret Sedeen, *Star Spangled Banner*, Washington D.C.: Book Division, National Geographic Society pg. 42.
2. Ibid., pg. 28.
3. Ibid., pg. 42.
4. Ibid., pg. 44.
5. David Eggenberger, *Flags of the U.S.A.*, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company pg. 46.
6. Ibid., pg. 47.
7. Ibid., pg. 47.
8. Ibid., pg. 47.
9. Margaret Sedeen, *Star Spangled Banner*, Washington D.C.: Book Division, National Geographic Society pg. 51.
10. Furlong and McCandless, *So Proudly We Hail*, Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press pg. 183.
11. Ibid., pg. 184.
12. Ibid., pg. 185.
13. Boleslaw & Marie-Louise D'Otrange Mastai, *The Stars and the Stripes*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf. pg. 153.
14. Margaret Sedeen, *Star Spangled Banner*, Washington, D.C.: Book Division National Geographic Society pg. 81.
15. David Eggenberger, *Flags of the U.S.A.*, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company pg. 158.