

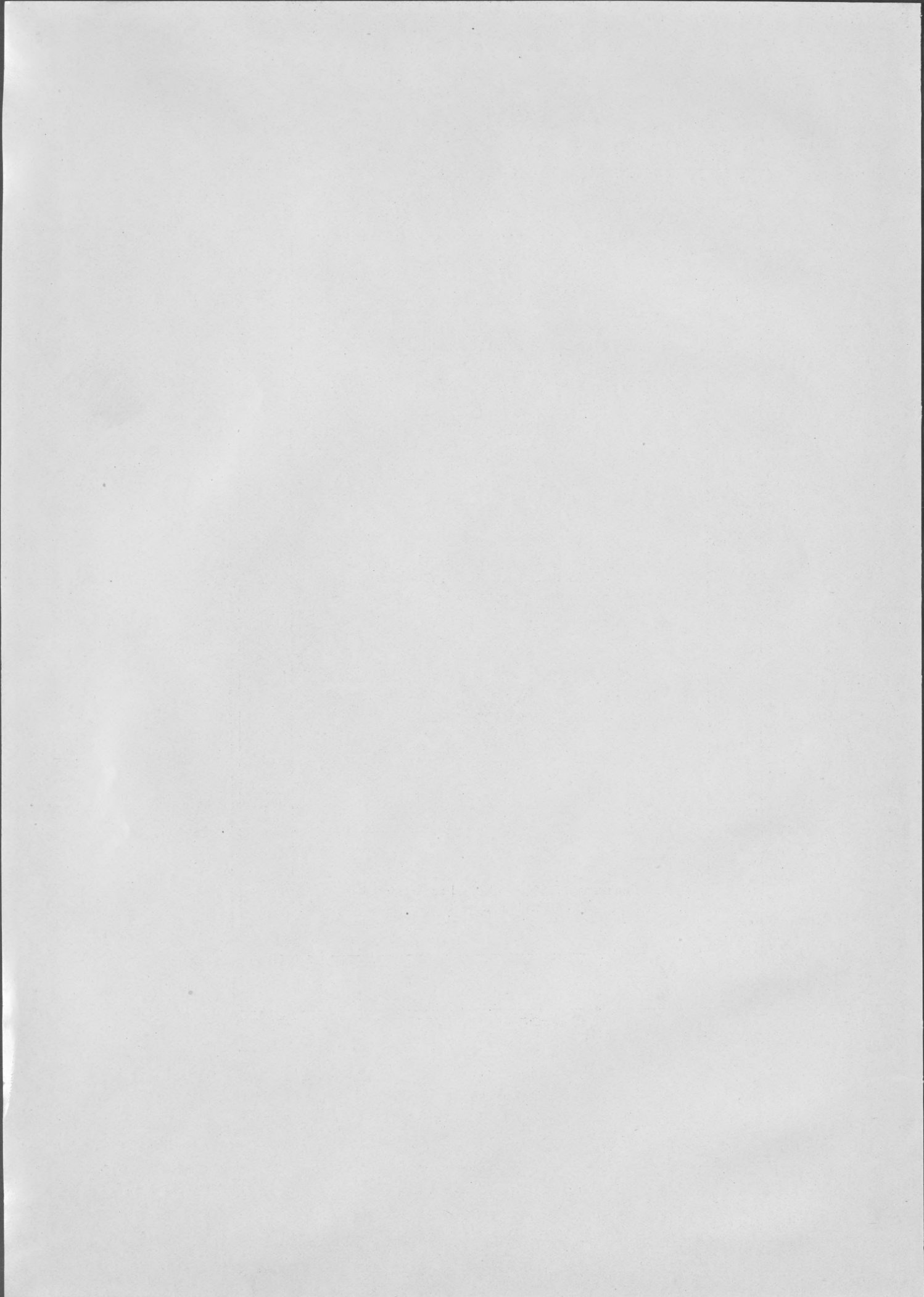
THE ORIGIN
AND EVOLUTION OF
THE UNITED STATES
FLAG



By
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THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF THE UNITED STATES FLAG

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Before we can thoroughly understand the origin and development of our flag it is necessary to go back many years and study the origin and development of that flag from which ours has been evolved.

CROSS OF ST. ANDREW

The accounts told of the adoption of the Cross of St. Andrew (fig. 1) as the standard of Scotland have the dates and names of those concerned too conflicting to warrant our placing entire credence in them, but the date was probably early in the eighth century.

CROSS OF ST. GEORGE

About the middle of the last half of the thirteenth century Prince Edward, afterwards Edward I of England, while on one of the crusades became interested in the story of St. George and the dragon, and before returning home went to the Monastery of Cappadocia at Beirut, where his interest increased to such a point that soon thereafter he adopted the red Cross of St. George on a white field as the national flag. (Fig. 2.) It will be seen, therefore, that the flag of Scotland antedated that of England by centuries.

FLAG OF GREAT BRITAIN, OR UNION JACK

After James VI of Scotland ascended the throne of England, in 1603, as James I, he was constantly annoyed by the eternal wrangling between the masters of the English and Scotch ships when they met at sea as to which one should first dip its colors to the other. He was extremely anxious to unite the two kingdoms into one country, as well

as to stop this annoyance. Therefore, in 1606, as one step toward the accomplishment of his desire, he united the two crosses into a new flag, which subsequently became known as the Union Jack. (Fig. 3.) This he required all vessels of both countries to carry at their mainmast, at the same time carrying from their foremast their old flag, showing to which of the two countries the vessels belonged. However, it was a century later, 1707, before the two countries agreed upon their union under the name of Great Britain, the first article of which agreement required the union of the crosses to be used in all their flags, banners, standards, and ensigns both at sea and on land. The designs of the flags or colors made for the army were ornate, whilst those for the navy and merchant marine were simple, but each of them consisted either wholly or in part of the Union Jack, and such was the case at the beginning of the American Revolution in 1775. That uprising was really a revolt against the monarchical despotism of the time, and the idea of separation from the mother country was then but little thought of or considered; in fact, the common sentiment that bound the Colonies together was not a very strong tie and required diplomatic handling to avoid breaking.

When General Washington, after his election as General and Commander in Chief, reached Cambridge on July 3, 1775, to take command he found the so-called army practically without either colors or uniforms. In fact, General Putnam, who commanded the Connecticut troops, is said to have worn the jeans, supported by only one suspender, which he had on when, hearing of the Battles of Lexington and Concord, he left his plow and started for Cambridge. So General Washington assigned to the various officers, as a distinction of rank, ribbons varying in color and number, and these were worn by them until something more formal was designed. There were practically neither flags nor colors, though some of the individual companies are supposed to have brought with them those which they had previously used.

COLONIAL FLAGS

Washington had the entire Army to organize in all its minute details, and the question of colors, being of less importance than many others, was not given serious consideration at the start, but a little later he urged the various colonels to provide for their regiments colors of such design

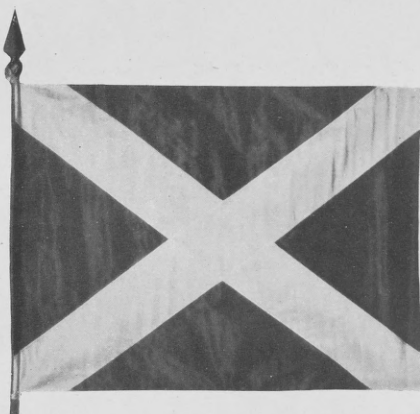


FIG. 1.—Scotch flag. White cross of St. Andrew on a blue field

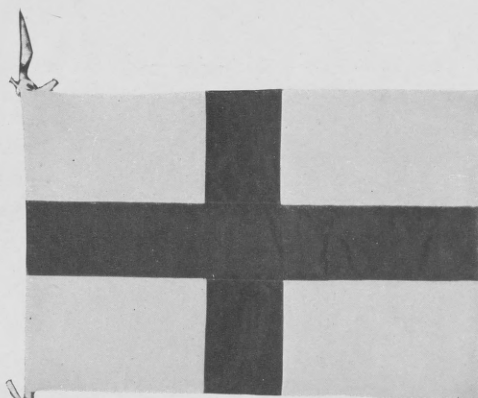


FIG. 2.—English flag. Red cross of St. George on a white field

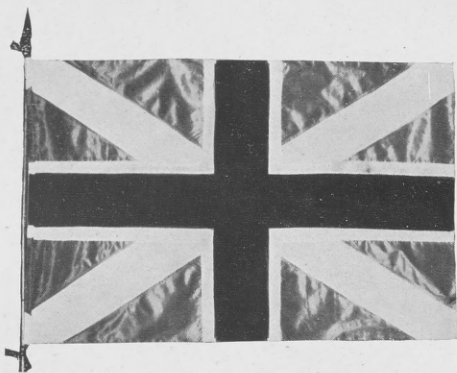


FIG. 3.—King's or union colors of James I, 1606



FIG. 4.—Massachusetts pine-tree flag of American Revolution.
Field, white; tree, green; letters, gilt.



FIG. 5.—Rhode Island flag. Field white; union, 13 white stars on a blue field



FIG. 6.—Flag of Third New York at Yorktown, October 19, 1781



FIG. 7.—Flag of Philadelphia Troop of Light Horse, that acted as Washington's escort from Philadelphia to New York in June, 1775

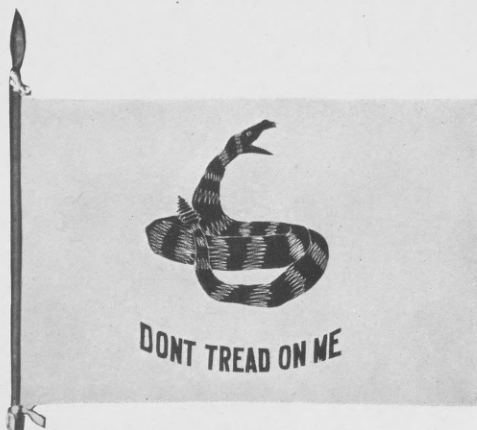


FIG. 8.—Gadsden and Virginia flag. Coiled rattlesnake on white or yellow field, with motto

or designs as might appeal to them. This was frequently done, and in many instances some design of thirteen units was used to represent the revolting Colonies.

Some of the Colonies went so far as to adopt flags of their own. For instance, Massachusetts adopted the pine tree, with the motto "An Appeal to Heaven" (fig. 4); Rhode Island one having an anchor and the word "Hope," within the canton a union of thirteen white stars on a blue field (fig. 5), said to be the first flag on which the thirteen Colonies were represented by thirteen stars. At Yorktown the Third New York Regiment carried a color (fig. 6) bearing an ornate design that was afterwards adopted for the seal of that State. Pennsylvania had ships' colors made for her navy in 1777; but being unable to find any reference as to their design, I am inclined to think she followed the old custom of having placed on them the arms of the State. The First Troop of Light Horse, organized in Philadelphia in 1774, in anticipation of the coming trouble, carried a very beautiful flag that was given to them by their commander, Captain Markoe. In the center of this flag (fig. 7) was a knot tied with thirteen cords, and in the canton thirteen horizontal stripes, alternating blue and silver. This company acted as General Washington's escort from Philadelphia through Pennsylvania and across the States of New Jersey and New York to the Connecticut line, just after his election as Commander in Chief of the Army, and it is claimed that their flag was the first one on which the union of the Colonies was represented by thirteen horizontal stripes. This idea of thirteen stripes in the union became quite popular and was occasionally used as late as the War of 1812. Virginia is said to have adopted the rattlesnake (fig. 8), which Colonel Gadsden urged Congress to adopt, but I have searched for the legislative act without success. The South Carolina flag has an interesting history. In September, 1775, the committee of safety of Charleston instructed Col. William Moultrie to take possession of Fort Johnson, on James Island, which he did. The uniform of their troops was blue, with a silver increscent in the cap. Soon realizing that a flag was needed, he improvised one having a blue field with a white increscent in the canton. This was the flag which Sergeant Jasper so gallantly rescued on June 28, 1776, when the fort of palmetto logs on Sullivans Island was attacked by the British fleet under Admiral Sir Peter Parker, and it was under this flag that the Declaration of Independence was read

to the people of Charleston on August 8, 1776. When that State came to officially adopt a flag it took the one which Colonel Moultrie had designed, and in recognition of the good services of the palmetto logs placed upon it the palmetto tree. (Fig. 9.)

CAMBRIDGE, GREAT UNION, OR STRIPED UNION FLAG

But it would not do to accept any of these flags as emblematic of the thirteen Colonies, because of their sectional prejudices; and, singular as it may seem, the flag which apparently first received some official recognition by General Washington as representative of the thirteen Colonies sprang into being without any known official order or direction. The statement is made that it was designed by a committee appointed by Congress for that purpose; but the committee referred to was appointed to confer with General Washington and others for the purpose of devising means for organizing and maintaining an army, and neither does their official report nor correspondence show that they even considered the question of a flag. It was not long after their return to Philadelphia when, on January 1, 1776, there was hoisted over General Washington's headquarters on Prospect Hill, at Somerville, near Cambridge, a flag having thirteen horizontal red and white stripes, and in the canton was the Union Jack (fig. 10), complying with the act of 1707, requiring that it be on all flags, banners, standards, and ensigns, whether used on land or at sea. It was merely the British marine flag of that day, with the solid red field divided by white ribbons so as to make thirteen red and white stripes, representing the thirteen revolting Colonies.

At that time the idea of independence was not generally seriously considered, so that the Union Jack in this flag showed the allegiance of the Colonies to their mother country. The flag itself was immediately appropriated by the Navy, for our continental fleet under Admiral Hopkins carried it as a national ensign early in February, if not in January, 1776; and although our Army used it over fortifications and barracks, they did not carry it in battle. With the growth of the idea of independence the colonists apparently conceived a dislike for the Union Jack in the flag, for after 1776 I have found no definite instance of its use by our Revolutionary patriots. After the abandonment of this flag, and before the adoption of our starry emblem, I have not been able to obtain reliable information as to just what our Navy did carry, but I doubt if there was any definite design common to all its vessels.

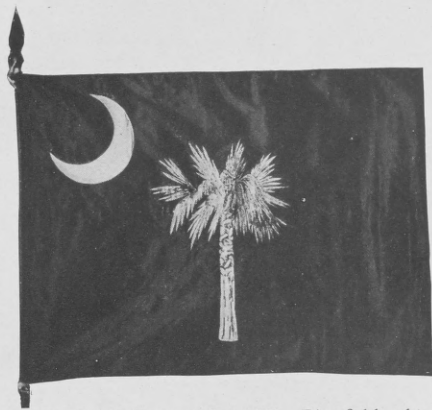


FIG. 9.—South Carolina flag, 1776. Blue field; white palmetto and increscent

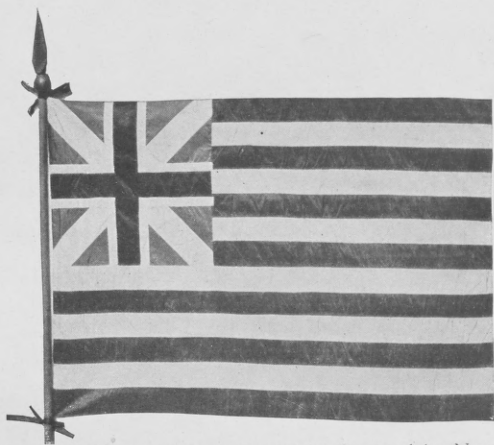


FIG. 10.—Striped union or Cambridge flag-used by Navy during 1776

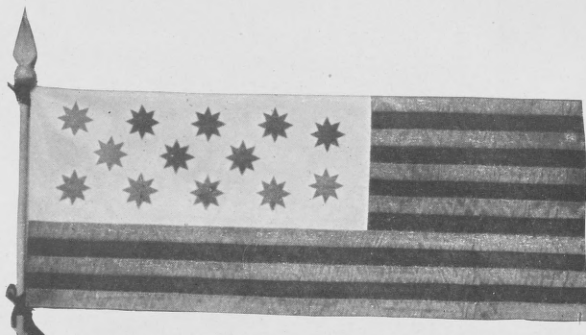


FIG. 11.—Flag of North Carolina Militia at Battle of Guilford Courthouse, March 15, 1781

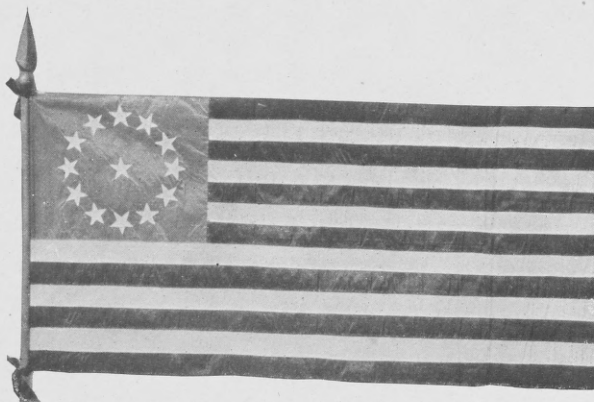


FIG. 12.—Flag of Third Maryland at Battle of Cowpens, January 17, 1781

OUR FIRST FLAG ACT

It was on June 4, 1777, that the Continental Congress passed the following act establishing the Stars and Stripes as the flag of our country:

Resolved, That the flag of the United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation.

You will notice that this act does not define how many points the stars were to have nor how they were to be arranged.

Our Navy began to use the new flag immediately. The British Army and Navy had used different flags for many years, and apparently we thought we should do likewise, for the official correspondence between General Washington and the Board of War shows that it was over two years before they agreed upon a design for the Army to carry "as variant from the marine flag," and over three years more before the Board of War succeeded in obtaining the necessary materials and having national colors made for our Army. The details of the design are only imperfectly described in this correspondence, neither flag nor design having been preserved, so far as I have been able to learn, but it contained the union, and in the center was a serpent, with the number of the regiment and name of the State where the regiment was organized. This correspondence also shows that the national colors prepared by the Board of War for the Army were ready for distribution in the fall of 1782, and that they had not been distributed as late as March 11, 1783, being then in the hands of the field commissary. The war was then practically over, and there is nothing to show that our Revolutionary Army ever carried any flags furnished by the American Congress. Those that were carried were purely personal, each made by or for some officer, company, or regiment, and represented the sentiments of the makers.

So far I have succeeded in locating only one Stars and Stripes that I feel sure was carried by the American Army during our Revolutionary War. It was carried by the North Carolina Militia at the Battle of Guilford Courthouse, March 15, 1781; but the stripes are blue and red and the union has a white field with thirteen eight-pointed blue stars. (Fig. 11.) There is also another flag hanging in the statehouse at Annapolis that it is claimed, and probably correctly, was carried by the Third Maryland

Regiment at the Battle of Cowpens, January 17, 1781. It has thirteen five-pointed stars—one in the center and twelve arranged in the form of a circle around it. (Fig. 12.) In both cases these flags were purely personal, not official. A Stars and Stripes preserved in the statehouse at Boston (fig. 13) is claimed to have flown over Fort Independence during the American Revolution, but it was not carried by the Army and probably was not furnished by the Board of War.

REORGANIZATION OF THE ARMY

The Army was disbanded in November, 1783, by act of Congress; but even before the adoption of the Federal Constitution Congress appears to have recognized the necessity of having something of an army, and on October 3, 1787, passed an act creating one consisting of one regiment having eight companies of Infantry and one battalion of Artillery. After the adoption of our Federal Constitution and the organization of our Government Congress passed the act of September 29, 1789, taking over this little force as the Army of the United States, but it did not carry the Stars and Stripes.

EARLY NATIONAL COLORS

The first flag carried by our Army as national colors is still in existence, hanging in the chapel on Governors Island. (Fig. 14.) Under the act of March 3, 1791, the size of the Army was increased from one regiment to two, and then it became necessary to have two flags, one for each regiment. The one carried by the first regiment has been preserved and is to-day at the United States Military Academy at West Point. (Fig. 15.) The design is the same as that previously carried, but with the addition of a designation in the canton which included the number of the regiment, though not the branch of the service, that being unnecessary, for the composition of each regiment was the same. On both of these flags the stars were eight-pointed. Owing to trouble with the Indians it became necessary to raise two additional regiments, known as the first and second levies, and colors were also provided for them, and marked "First Levies" and "Second Levies."

In 1792 our Army was again increased in size, called The Legion, and divided into four sublegions. The flags which were provided the year before for the four regiments were to have their designations altered to

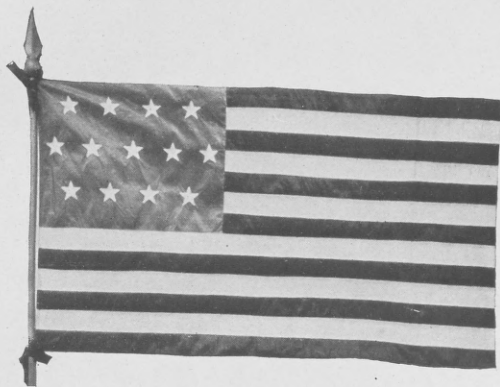


FIG. 13.—Flag of Fort Independence, at Boston, Mass., in 1781



FIG. 14.—United States Army national colors, 1787 or
1789 to 1791

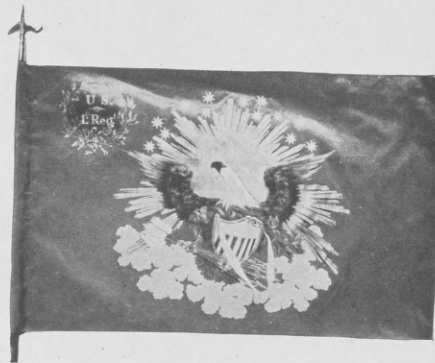


FIG. 15.—Second United States Army national colors,
1791 to 1792



FIG. 16.—Flag carried by United States Army as national colors during War of 1812.
Design embroidered

fit the four sublegions. It was then proposed to have a legionary flag of silk with a bald eagle as large as life and formed of silver. What decision was arrived at we do not know, but soon thereafter the Army was carrying as national colors a blue flag having on it an eagle in natural colors.

OUR SECOND FLAG ACT

Vermont was admitted to the Union in 1791 and Kentucky in 1792, and their Members in Congress claimed that these States also should be represented on the flag. Accordingly Congress passed the following act, approved by President Washington January 13, 1794:

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That from and after the first day of May, anno Domini one thousand seven hundred and ninety-five, the flag of the United States be fifteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be fifteen stars, white in a blue field.

But still the Army did not carry the Stars and Stripes.

NATIONAL COLORS OF THE WAR OF 1812

By act of May 30, 1796, the sublegion feature of our Army was abandoned, and although I have no positive description of the legionary flag I am strongly of the opinion that its design, slightly modified to fit the exigencies of the case, continued to be carried by our Army as national colors until 1834, having a blue field with a simulation of the arms of the United States thereon. At the outbreak of the War of 1812 quite a number of these flags were evidently made. Our seventeenth State was admitted in 1802. As a rule the shield on the eagle's breast had seventeen white and red stripes, and on the chief of the shield were the letters "U. S."; above or around the eagle were seventeen stars, sometimes five-pointed, but more frequently six-pointed, and below the eagle was a scroll, pale blue if the stars were five-pointed, but red if they were six-pointed, carrying the number and name of the regiment. (Figs. 16 and 17.)

Singular as it may seem, the printed regulations of our War Department do not show what the Army carried as national colors at this period; but fortunately a number of the flags that were so used have been preserved and are at present at the United States Quartermaster's Depot at Philadelphia, hanging in the chapel at the Army post on Governors Island, and at the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Those which were captured by the British are in the Royal Hospital at Chelsea, London, and as trophies of war were carefully labeled. Such Stars and Stripes as the British captured were all marine flags, none of them Army colors. They constitute the mute evidence upon which what I have just said is largely based.

OUR THIRD FLAG ACT

In 1816 Hon. Peter H. Wendover, Congressman from New York, advocated a further modification in our flag to give representation to the States which had been admitted since the last flag act was adopted. He wanted a star and a stripe for each State in the Union. Objection was made that there was no telling to what extent our Nation would grow, and if an additional star and stripe were added for each new State the flag might become very awkward in shape and design. After two years of discussion the suggestion of Capt. Samuel Chester Reid was adopted, that we return to the original thirteen stripes, with one star in the union for each State. Accordingly Congress passed the following act, approved by President Monroe April 4, 1818:

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That from and after the fourth day of July next the flag of the United States be thirteen horizontal stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be twenty stars, white in a blue field.

SECTION 2. *And be it further enacted, That on the admission of every new State into the Union one star be added to the union of the flag, and that such addition shall take effect on the fourth day of July next succeeding such admission.*

A portion of Captain Reid's suggestion was not adopted, namely, that the stars be arranged in horizontal rows for the Navy and to form one great star for the merchant marine. His failure to make a suggestion for an arrangement of the stars for the Army is silent testimony in support of the statement that the Army did not then carry the Stars and Stripes.

USE OF THE STARS AND STRIPES AS NATIONAL COLORS

Although the early publications of our Army Regulations make frequent mention of both national and regimental colors, they contain no description of them until 1834, when the garrison flag is described as the Stars



FIG. 17.—Flag carried by United States Army as national colors during War of 1812. Design painted



FIG. 18.—National colors of United States Army, 1834 to 1861

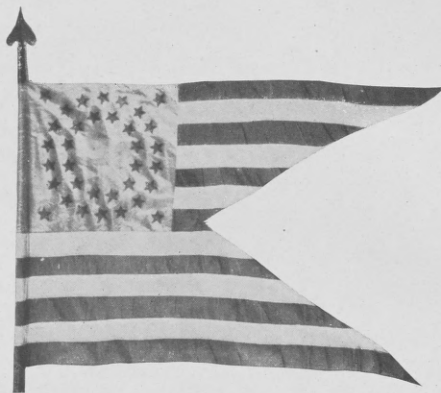


FIG. 19.—Cavalry guidon of Civil War period, 1861 to 1865. Union, light blue; stars, gold, 34. This guidon was never issued to the troops



FIG. 20.—Union of Marine Corps flag carried in Mexican War as national colors, after mounting between Brussels net for preservation

and Stripes, and the Artillery was ordered to carry such as national colors. The Infantry then was ordered to carry as national colors and the Cavalry as national standard a blue flag having on it a simulation of the arms of the United States, varying somewhat from that carried during the War of 1812 in that a second scroll bearing the motto "E Pluribus Unum" was placed in the beak of the eagle, both scrolls always having red fields. Above the eagle was placed one star for each State in the Union. These stars were generally, if not universally, six-pointed. (Fig. 18.)

It was not until 1841 that the Infantry was given the right to carry the Stars and Stripes as national colors, and what had previously been their national colors then became their regimental colors.

Not until 1887, twenty-two years after the close of our Civil War, was the Cavalry given the right to carry the Stars and Stripes as the national standard, although in 1863 each battery of Artillery and each company of Cavalry was allowed to carry a small guidon consisting of the Stars and Stripes (fig. 19), but that privilege was revoked at the end of that war.

The United States Marines did not begin to carry the Stars and Stripes as national colors until 1876. Those which they carried as such in the Mexican and Civil Wars had an eagle in the union. These originals were located in 1917, mounted between Brussels net for preservation, and placed in the Marine Headquarters at Washington, D. C. (Fig. 20.)

In no one of the three acts adopting our national flag is there mention as to how these stars should be arranged or as to how many points they should have. Apparently all matters of detail were left to the rulings of the department or the whims of the makers. In our first flag the stars were sometimes arranged in the quincunx order, or in a circle, or with one star in the center and the remaining twelve either in the form of a circle or hollow square, or three horizontal rows of four, five, and four, respectively, or indeed in the *semé* or irregular order.

In our second flag they were also arranged in several different orders—three horizontal rows of five each, or three vertical rows of five each; sometimes in the quincunx order, as was the flag that floated over Fort McHenry when Key was inspired to write "The Star-Spangled Banner." (Fig. 21.) Some of them had one star in the center and fourteen stars arranged in the form of a circle and occasionally arranged so as to form one great star.

The Third Kentucky Mounted Riflemen, under Col. Richard M. Johnson, at the Battle of the Thames, on October 5, 1813, carried a guidon having four stars in the corners and the remaining nine stars in the form of a circle, with what appears to be the letter "I" in the center. The flag had only thirteen stars and thirteen stripes, but there is nothing to show whether or not it antedated the act of 1794. Probably they did then what we do to-day, continue the use of a flag until it is worn out, even though it may not have the full complement of stars. The original Johnson guidon is in the rooms of the Kentucky State Historical Society at Frankfort.

The Navy Department has always made its own flags, and as early as 1818 the naval regulations as to design and proportions were explicit, and after the admission of each new State minute instructions were issued showing what changes to make. The custom in our Army, however, was to let out the making of its flags by contract, and consequently there was always a lack of uniformity.

There were so many different designs in use in 1837 that the Government of Holland asked its representative in this country to report just what our flag was. Similar requests were made by other countries, and in 1851 the commanding general of our Army asked one of his aids, then Captain (afterwards General) Schuyler Hamilton, to investigate the matter and write a history of our flag. This was done, the work being published in 1852, and so far as I have been able to learn it is the first careful study of the subject.

FLAGS WITH AN EAGLE IN THE UNION

Apparently about 1841, when our Infantry was first given the right to carry the Stars and Stripes, there was a desire on the part of some to preserve their old national colors in the union of the new flag.

One of these, planted by Gen. John C. Frémont on August 15, 1842, on the top of Pikes Peak, has the eagle with a bunch of arrows in one claw and the Indian pipe of peace in the other, with thirteen stars above and a like number below. (Fig. 22.) The original of this is preserved in the Southwest Museum at Los Angeles, Calif.

During the Mexican War the Fourth Indiana Volunteers carried a flag having in the union an eagle standing on a segment of the globe,



FIG. 21.—Flag that inspired Francis Scott Key to write "The Star-Spangled Banner," September 14, 1814

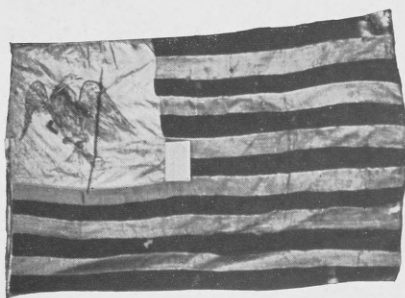


FIG. 22.—Flag of Gen. John Charles Frémont, 1840 to 1841. Reverse is purple silk, with "Pike's Peak, 1841," embroidered on it in gold



FIG. 23.—Flag of Fourth Indiana during Mexican War

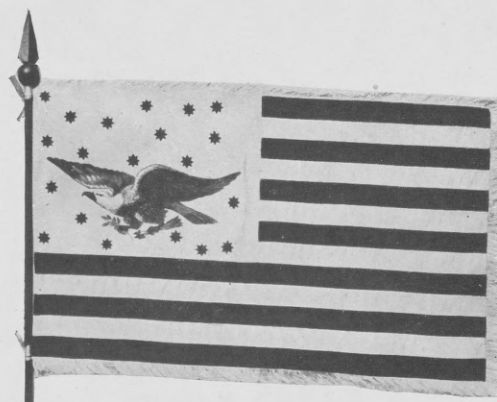


FIG. 24.—Flag of Second Kentucky Infantry during Mexican War. Under it Colonel McKee and Lieut. Col. Henry Clay, jr., lost their lives at Buena Vista



FIG. 25.—Eagle flag of 34+10 stars used during the Civil War, 1861 to 1865



FIG. 26

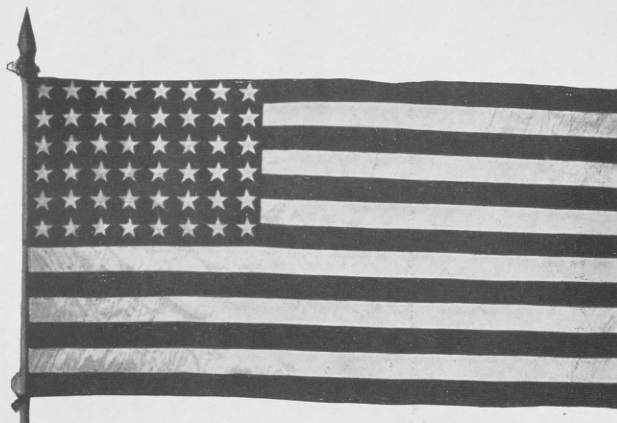


FIG. 27.—United States flag as per Executive order of October 29, 1912



FIG. 28.—Naval boat flag under Executive order of October 29, 1912, corrected

with a bundle of arrows in one claw, as though intending to conquer the earth. (Fig. 23.) This has been preserved and is now in the historical section of the Smithsonian Institution at Washington.

Another flag that recently came to light, though in a badly dilapidated condition, is preserved by the Kentucky State Historical Society at Frankfort, Ky. It was carried by the Second Kentucky Volunteer Infantry during the Mexican War. The fragments show that this flag also had an eagle in the canton and that the stars were eight-pointed. (Fig. 24.)

Another flag of somewhat similar design, and supposed to have been carried by one of the regiments during our Civil War, is preserved at the United States Military Academy at West Point, N. Y. (Fig. 25.)

It is probable that each of these flags with an eagle in the union was purely personal and not furnished by the War Department.

ODD ARRANGEMENT OF STARS

On July 4, 1857, a resident of Jersey City was interested in observing the variations in design of the American flags then on display. He noted that though the stripes were generally red and white, sometimes they were white and red, and the stars on different flags were arranged in nine different methods. Quite a number of such flags that have seen actual use are preserved in the Ordnance Museum at the United States Military Academy at West Point, N. Y. They show a wide range in the arrangement of the stars.

EXECUTIVE ORDER OF OCTOBER 29, 1912

The different departments of our National Government appointed representatives to confer and see if they could not bring order out of chaos. The proportions of naval flags and Army colors are generally quite different, the former being much longer in proportion to its height, the latter being much shorter to avoid interfering with the color or standard bearer, in addition to which Army colors are generally both fringed and tasseled. (Fig. 26.) It was decided to leave the Army colors alone, but to fly the naval flag from flagstaffs and our Government buildings. Accordingly, following the recommendations of this committee, on October 29, 1912, President Taft issued an Executive

order defining minutely the proportions and other details of our flag (fig. 27), at the same time approving a custom which had existed in the Navy, probably ever since it was instituted, of placing on their small boat flags only thirteen stars instead of the full complement in order to preserve their identity. (Fig. 28.) The use of only thirteen stars on our small or "boat" flags was discontinued by an Executive order of President Wilson dated May 29, 1916, and now all flags, colors, and so forth, used by our Government are required to have their full complement of stars.

