

# THE STARS AND STRIPES

By George Constantourakis

This article will attempt to present the development of the American Flag from the Colonial times to the present, with the use of a limited number of M.C. in my possession.

## THE BIRTH OF OUR NATION'S FLAG, 1776 (Figure 1)

It is not yet clear who created the very first American Flag. In 1870, a grandson of Betsy Ross claimed that his grandmother sewed the first flag under the direction of General George Washington. As the story goes, in May and June of 1776 while George Washington Philadelphia, he came to Betsy Ross's house (see Figure 2, small image on card) with Colonel George Ross and Robert Morris. The three talked in secret committee to Betsy about making a flag for the new country, that was about to declare its independence from England. Ross suggested a design and Washington made a rough pencil sketch. Washington wanted six-pointed stars for the flag, but Ross convinced him to make them five-pointed. The use of five-pointed stars, or pentagrams, symbolizes a break with European heraldic tradition of six-pointed stars, or hexagrams.

Betsy Ross sewed the first American Flag with a circle of 13 white stars and 13 red and white stripes. Congress adopted that flag on June 14, 1777. Both stamp and card show the painting *'The Birth of Our Nation's Flag'* by Chas. H. Weisberger, portraying from left General G. Washington, Colonel George Ross (standing), Robert Morris, and Betsy Ross with the Flag.

## FRANCIS HOPKINSON FLAG, 1777 (Figure 2 on stamp)

It is now generally believed that the popular story that Betsy Ross created the first flag is more fiction than fact. There is not enough evidence that a flag with 13 stars in a circle was ever used. Instead, a pattern with alternating rows of 3,2,3,2, and 3 stars may have been used. The U.S. Postal Service notes that the exact design "is not known and current thinking favors the ring of stars as the Hopkinson design". Francis Hopkinson was a member of the Continental Congress and he is also credited for designing the first 'Stars and Stripes'. In a resolution of June 14, 1777 they were said to represent "a new constellation". However the card on Figure 2 refers to *'The Birth of Our Flag'* portraying Betsy Ross and her friends in the process of sewing the flag. There is also a small separate image of the house of Betsy Ross, that still stands as a historic landmark in downtown Philadelphia.

## THE SPIRIT OF '76 (Figure 3)

This painting by A. M. Willard, also known as *'Yankee Doodle'* is described as the most inspiring patriotic painting. It was presented to the town of Marblehead, Mass. by General John Devereux, whose son was the model for the drummer boy. It is kept at the Abbot Hall of this town. In the background one sees the First American Flag with a circle of 13 stars set in blue, and 13 red and white stripes.

### STAR-SPANGLED BANNER, 1814 (Figure 4)

The Star and Stripes took a number of different patterns in the years that followed the winning of American independence. When Vermont and Kentucky joined the original thirteen states, the flag gained a new star and stripe for each of the new states. It was this flag of fifteen stars (of alternating rows of 3,2,3,2,3, and 2) and of fifteen stripes that was flying during the war of 1812 when Francis Scott Key wrote the words of "*The Star Spangled Banner*". Key, a lawyer, while he was visiting a prisoner on a British ship anchored in the Chesapeake Bay near the city of Baltimore, the British began bombarding Baltimore's Fort McHenry with cannon fire. Throughout the long night of September 13-14, 1814, Key remained on the deck of the ship, straining to see if the American flag still flew over Fort McHenry. Finally, by the light of the early dawn he spotted it. He knew that his city of Baltimore had not fallen to the British. The same flag - ragged and bullet-torn - that inspired Francis Scott Key to write "*The Star Spangled Banner*" is on display at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. (see card on Figure 4).

The white of the stars and the alternating white stripes stand for purity and innocence. The blue of the field on which the stars repose - the canton - represents justice and integrity. The red of the alternating stripes represents hardiness and valor.

By 1818, more states were ready to join the Union. Congress decided, however, in the Flag Act to return to thirteen stripes and to add only new stars as the country added new states. It was in 1824 that the American flag was first called "*Old Glory*" (see stamps on Figures 10 & 11). In 1892 the Pledge of Allegiance was written, but it wasn't until 1954 that it included all the words recited today. Similarly, Flag Day on June 14 goes all the way back to 1877, but it has been an official U.S. holiday only since 1949.

### 48 - STAR FLAG, 1912 (Figure 5)

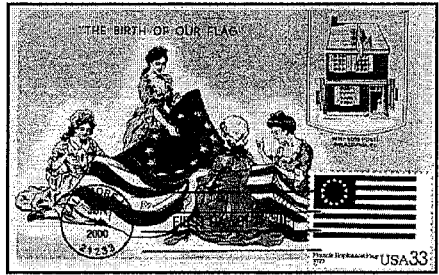
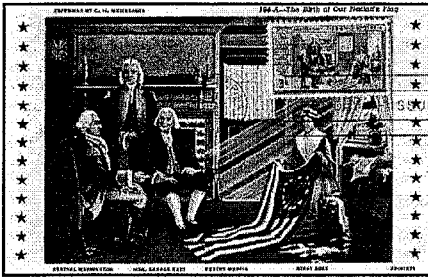
The forty eight stars represented each state of the Union, and the thirteen stripes represent the founding states. This version of "*Old Glory*" was official from 1912 to 1959, the longest period any fixed star pattern has been used. Americans saluted this flag during World War I, the growth decade of the 1920's, the Great Depression, World War II, and the growth decade of the 1950's.

### FLAG RAISING ON IWO JIMA, 1945 (Figures 6, 7, and 8)

A platoon of marines hoisted the (48-star) American Flag on Feb. 23, 1945 on the peak of Mount Suribachi - the highest point on the volcanic island of Iwo Jima - after four days of savage fighting. This heavily fortified barren island of 8 square miles (only 750 miles south of Tokyo) was strategically vital to the US forces in the final stages of the war against Japan. The 21000 strong Japanese garrison had tunnelled deep into the island's volcanic rock and set up concealed pill-boxes to cover the landing beaches. The preliminary US bombing left these defences undamaged, and beaches of soft volcanic ash impeded the use of vehicles to bring up supplies from the beach. The Americans, led by the Fifth Marine Division, fought - in Feb. and March of 1945 - one of their most bloody campaigns.

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Clockwise from Left: (Figure 1) *'The Birth of Our Nation's Flag, 1776'*. Issue: Jan. 2, 1952. For: 200th Anniversary of birth of Betsy Ross. Cancel: First Day, Philadelphia, PA, special mention. (Figure 2) *'The Francis Hopkinson Flag, 1777'*. Issue: June 14, 2000. For: Celebrate Flag Day. Cancel: First Day, Baltimore, MD, special mention. (Figure 3) *'The Spirit of '76'*. Issue: Jan. 1, 1976. For: American Bicentennial. Cancel: First Day, Pasadena, CA, special mention. (Figure 4) *'The Star Spangled Banner, 1814'*. Issue: June 14, 2000. For: Celebrate Flag Day. Cancel: First Day, Baltimore, MD, special mention.



Both sides suffered heavy casualties; more than 6000 men were lost on the American side alone.

The *Flag Raising on Iwo Jima* is one of the most famous pictures of World War II, by photographer Joe Rosenthal of the Associated Press, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1945 for this picture (see Figure 6 stamp & card, Figure 7 stamp, and Figure 8 card). This picture served as a model for the United States Marine Corps War Memorial at Arlington Cemetery, in Washington D.C. (see Figure 7 card). The flag raisers shown in the front of the picture are (from left) Ira H. Hayes, Franklin R. Sousley, John H. Bradley, and Harlon H. Block. Two other men, Michael Strank, and Rene A. Gagnon, are barely visible behind Sousley and Bradley.

50 - STAR FLAG, 1960 (Figure 9, and Figures 10, 11, and 12)

On Jan. 3, 1959 Alaska became the 49th State, and on Aug. 21, 1959 Hawaii became the 50th state. Thus the current 50 - *Star Flag* was born on July 4, 1960. All former versions of the flag are legal but they yield precedence to the 50 - *Star Flag* when they are displayed together. The card on Figure 9 shows the Flag display at the Cumberland Gap Nat. Historical Park, that is located on a high pass through the Appalachian Mts., near the junction of the boundaries of the states of Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

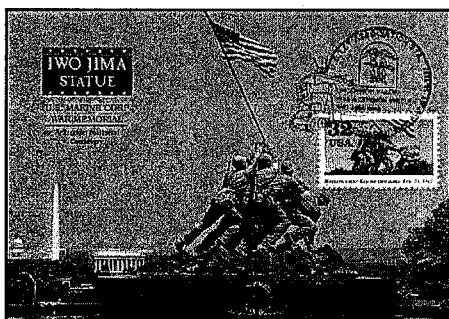
The "*Old Glory*" stamps of Figures 10 & 11, and the "*Honoring the Veterans*" stamp of Figure 12 portray the U.S. flag flying in a stiff breeze. This image is based on a photo by the 'Harold Lambert Studios'. The flag on these stamps bears a striking resemblance to flags on other recent U.S. stamps, i.e. the 1988 25c stamp '*Flag and Clouds*', and the 1993 29c stamp '*I Pledge Allegiance*'.

The M.C. on Figure 12 with the "*Honoring the Veterans*" stamp, shows on card the 50 - *Star Flag* as a backdrop to the monument of "*The Spirit of Naval Aviation*" at the Nat. Museum Naval Aviation in Washington D.C. The bronze statues of this monument constitute a touching tribute to naval aviators of the past who fought for our freedom, and include naval aviators of: World War I, World War II, Early Post-war & Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm.

The American flag is a tangible symbol of both the American people and the ideals of democracy, liberty, pursuit of happiness, and the rule of law as embodied in the Constitution. On Oct. 24, the USPS issued a new stamp featuring a waving American flag above the motto 'UNITED WE STAND'. This was in response to the strong public demand for a patriotic stamp, following the unspeakable terrorist attacks on Sept. 11. This motto predates the United States, but its present form was popularized before the Civil War by George Pope Morris in his poem "*The Flag of Our Union*". The use of this latest 'UNITED WE STAND' flag stamp gives Americans an opportunity to express their resolve, their patriotism, their unity against an evil and coward new enemy. This resolve is already bearing fruit in Afghanistan, by freeing the local people from the oppressive rule of the Taliban, and by freeing the world of the Al Quada training bases.

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Clockwise from Left: (Figure 5) 'The 48-Star Flag, 1912'. Issue: June 14, 2000. For: Celebrate Flag Day. Cancel: First Day, Baltimore, MD, special mention. (Figure 6) 'Flag Raising on Iwo Jima, 1945'. Issue: July 11, 1945. For: Battle of Iwo Jima and honoring the achievements of the US Marines. Cancel: July 20, 1953, Jacksonville N.C., Camp Le Jeune Br. (Figure 7) 'Marines Raise Flag on Iwo Jima, 1945'. Issue: Sept. 2, 1992 (stamp from top left corner of a Miniature Sheet of 10 with a central label of a World Map, of 15 stamps size; 5th of 5 similar Sheets). For: World War II, 1945: 'Victory at Last'. Cancel: Aug. 04, 1997, Chicago, IL, special illustration and mention: 'Uncommon Valor was a Common Virtue, Iwo Jima, 1945'. (Figure 8) 'The 48-Star Flag, 1912', on stamp: Uncle Sam carries the Flag as soldiers are heading for battle; on card: Marines Raise Flag on Iwo Jima, based on an official U.S. World War II Treasury poster by C.C. Beal. Issue: Feb. 18, 1999. For: Celebrate the Century series - 1940's (World War II). Cancel: First Day, Dobbins AFB, GA, special mention.



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Clockwise from Left: (Figure 9) 'The 50-Star Flag, 1960'. Issue: June 14, 2000. For: Celebrate Flag Day. Cancel: First Day, Baltimore, MD, special mention. (Figure 10) 'Old Glory' (black G on green background) Issue: Jan. 12, 1995. For: Non profit Presort (stamp available only through the Philatelic Fullfilment Center). Cancel: Aug. 15, 1998, Niantic, CT, special mention & concordant illustration (triple). (Figure 11) 'Old Glory' (red G) Issue: Dec. 13, 1994. For: Use for U.S. addresses only. Cancel: Apr. 4, 1998, Columbus, OH, special illustration of a flag with 13 stars in a pattern with alternating rows of 3,2,3,2, and 3 stars. (Figure 12) 'Honoring the Veterans' Issue: May 23, 2001. For: Honoring the Veterans. Cancel: First Day, Washington, D.C., regular.

