



STARS &

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Children saluting the flag, 1925.
HHC Irene Kaufmann Collection.
Flag courtesy of Pete Keim.

G397-IRENE KAUFMANN SETTLEMENT
NEIGHBORHOOD ARTS & CRAFTS EXHIBIT

STRIPES

★ AN AMERICAN STORY ★



THE STORY OF ★ THE AMERICAN FLAG ★

By Kevin Keim

Flags are visual symbols, and few symbols are as universally recognized as the American flag. Despite the widespread familiarity of the flag, however, not many people are familiar with its history. *Stars & Stripes: An American Story*, an exhibition at the Heinz History Center in the spirit of Kevin Keim and Peter Keim's book, *A Grand Old Flag: A History of the United States Through Its Flags*, helps visitors understand the history of the flag and Americans' often complex relationships to it. Although most Americans can effortlessly recite the Pledge of Allegiance, few know about the origins of the flag those words honor. The tale of Betsy Ross is the beginning and the end of their notion of the origin of the Stars and Stripes. But most of that tale is pure invention, sprung to life a full century after its reputed events in order to satisfy patriotic fervor erupting nationwide (across 38 states and various territories) during the 1876 Centennial celebrations.

★THE skillful needle stitch, a patch to bind a tear, the thoughtful arrangement of stars, homespun thread—all remind us that someone expressed personal pride by crafting a flag with their own hands. ★

Vintage stars and stripes remind us how ordinary Americans handcrafted flags with care and artistic license from beautifully dyed materials, such as single-ply wool bunting.

Flags and flag photos courtesy of Pete and Kevin Keim.



ne fact about the flag is that there are, indeed, very few facts about its origin. Historians have combed through our national literature, our archives, and our attics, but have found little to illuminate the inspiration for the simple statement known as the First Flag Resolution that created the Stars and Stripes on June 14, 1777. The Continental Congress committee that proffered the resolution provided no explanation; no authors were noted.

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.

But from the time the Stars and Stripes was born in Philadelphia on June 14, 1777, its warp and weft have provided the fabric of our nation's story. Just as yarns run over and under each other from opposite directions to create fabric, we believe that the Stars and Stripes evolved from the interweaving of two profoundly different symbols, a theory first proposed by myself, Kevin, and my father Peter. On one hand, the stripes symbolized American resistance to British subjugation and tyranny, since to bear "stripes" in the 17th- and 18th-century colonies meant to be whipped with terrible, scarlet ferocity. On the other hand, the "new Constellation" of stars represented the splendor of the cosmos, the scientific and Enlightenment ideals that inspired the revolutionaries' political awakening, particularly inspired by Philadelphia astronomer David Rittenhouse.

Physically, flags are nothing more than pieces of fabric—wool, cotton, silk, or linen—sewn together to convey recognition of nationhood, or some other political or

collective group. But the Stars and Stripes, for most Americans, is far more than a token of citizenship, or legal or diplomatic authority. Instead, the flag is a deeply meaningful symbol, invested with all the instruments that are the birthright (or immigrational privilege) of every American.

When we look at America's history, we begin to understand that the flag's symbolism did not instantly blossom when it was first unfurled during the Revolutionary War. Instead, the flag only gradually invested itself in the American psyche, as people linked it to some of America's proudest moments—and some of its most painful. We believe that historic flags come alive through the stories they tell and their connection to the events that shaped our nation's history. Without these connections, they remain mere textile relics.

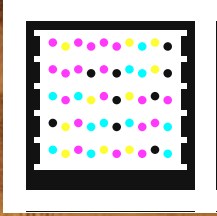
Attitudes about the flag also change with the times. For generations, using the flag in an advertisement or to adorn one's body were sharply regarded as wholly unacceptable. Generations of Americans would wince at the sight of an American flag being used as clothing, or as a shawl or cape to celebrate athletic or military victories. Even political candidates avoided using the flag as a campaign tool. How

one displayed, cared for, and retired a flag was a demonstration of respect, worthy of care and ritual. Notwithstanding the reverence people felt for the flag, Americans have always been reluctant to prohibit (or have questioned the wisdom of laws prohibiting) flag desecration, given the value we place on free expression. Today, images of the flag proliferate everywhere; on car bumpers, t-shirts, television commercials, tattoos, food labels, politicians' lapels, and even on bandanas or underwear. Perhaps as we all begin to understand better the history of the Stars and Stripes, we will revive, by choice rather than legal mandate, the proper decorum that the flag deserves.

Today, the vast majority of American flags are manufactured. Few of these are scarcely touched by an actual person during the fabrication process. These flags are made with machine-embroidered stars, synthetic fabric, chemical dyes, and are stitched together with military, unerring precision.

A profound quality of the old flags presented in *Stars & Stripes: An American Story* exhibition is the legacy of human touch, of an American's personal care, effort, and attention. The skillful needle stitch, a patch to bind a tear, the thoughtful arrangement of stars, homespun

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Generations of schoolchildren learned that patriot Betsy Ross designed the first American flag, but the story is shrouded in as much legend as fact. Nonetheless, in 1952, the U.S. Postal service issued a 3-cent stamp in her honor.



ABOVE: In this photomechanical print of the oil painting titled *Betsy Ross, 1777*, by J.L.G. Ferris, Betsy Ross shows Major Ross and Robert Morris how she cut the stars for the American flag. George Washington sits in a chair to the left.

Library of Congress.

LEFT: Completely hand sewn, this 13-star flag is an early version of what would become known as the "Great Luminary Pattern," where the individual stars are arranged to form a single star. Notice how each of the stars point or "sparkle" in different directions, a way that early flag makers graphically enlivened their flags.



Scene of Transfer of Louisiana from France to the United States in the Place d'Arms at New Orleans.

The Historic New Orleans Collection, Gift of Mr. Thomas Lennox, Acc. No. 1991.34.25.

thread—all remind us that someone expressed personal pride by crafting a flag with their own hands. That flags could be, and were in fact, made by anyone is emblematic that it is a symbol not owned by the government. That ordinary people took the time to hand sew pieces of red, white, and blue fabric together speaks volumes that the flag is for all, regardless of station in life, ethnic background, or political persuasion.

How early American flags were made reveal something of our nation's humble beginnings. The flag's history intersects with so many fascinating spheres of the American story: our founding and our nation's principles, politics, warfare, statehood, textile production, design, and popular culture. Ironically, many early American flags, even those during the Revolution, were made of British wool bunting. America was predominantly a rural, sparsely populated place, with little knowledge about textile production or the wherewithal to start such industries. Sometimes, flags on the frontier were made of even more modest materials—whatever was available—with

Dating from the Louisiana Purchase, when President Jefferson expanded the nation's territory and continental aspirations, this regal 18-star, wool bunting flag features a double medallion arrangement of cotton stars. The outer ring of 13 stars embrace a smaller ring of five stars representing Vermont, Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, and Louisiana.



patch stars and stitched grommets. Often, spaces were cut out of the blue fabric, so that the white stars on the front “peeked” through to the back, demonstrating an economy of means. Daily survival, to be sure, took precedence over the “fancy” work that flags required. Until the dawn of American industrialism in the mid-19th century, many flags were made at home or by flag makers or needlewomen in small shops. And since sewing was considered “home craft,” it is fair to assume that many early flags were made by women. Perhaps that’s why the maternal tale of Betsy Ross has so potently and tenaciously adhered to the birth of the flag.

And like the nation it represented—absorbing Americans who came from everywhere, with different tongues, religious beliefs, and customs—most of our Stars and Stripes were wonderfully, eccentrically, and creatively varied in their design. Not until the presidency of William Howard Taft in 1909 was there any direction for how, officially, the flag’s stars should be laid out. That fact alone gives us an abundance of wonderful designs, made throughout the history of the Republic according to the judgment, eye, and even whim of the flag maker.

The Stars and Stripes was not automatically regarded with the widespread reverence it is today. It took time. In fact, mention of the

flag was scarcely made during Revolutionary times. It was the War of 1812, and especially the events of the Civil War, that solidified the flag in the nation’s collective consciousness, and imbued the flag with the ideals of freedom, perseverance, liberty, and justice.

That the flag is also symbolic of the very “stitching together” of the Union, state by state, stripe by stripe, and star by star, also makes its story the story of America itself. It is difficult as modern-day Americans to imagine the precariousness of 1776 America, to place ourselves in a time and setting that would seem profoundly foreign, given our ease of travel, communication, and comfort. That a scattered community of colonists wedged between a domineering colonial power (with awesome naval power) to the East, and the

great, fearsome, wild unknowns to the West (which, for early Americans, began just over the Appalachian mountains), created a radically new nation, forged in discussion, debate, philosophy, and science is, in a sense, the loom upon which the Stars and Stripes was woven.

Of the countless flags that have been made since 1777, relatively few authentic ones survived. Fabric unravels; it disintegrates and fades. The flags in this exhibition, we believe, as tattered and worn as some may be, are precious survivors from our past. Each tells a story. ☼

Kevin Keim is director of the Charles Moore Foundation in Austin, Texas. He is the publisher and author of *PLACENOTES*, a guide to the culture of placemaking.

Children on the steps of the Irene Kaufmann Settlement House in the Hill District show their prizes for the 1940 Better Neighborhoods Contest.

HHC Irene Kaufmann Collection.



Flag Day in Pittsburgh, 1941. Library of Congress.

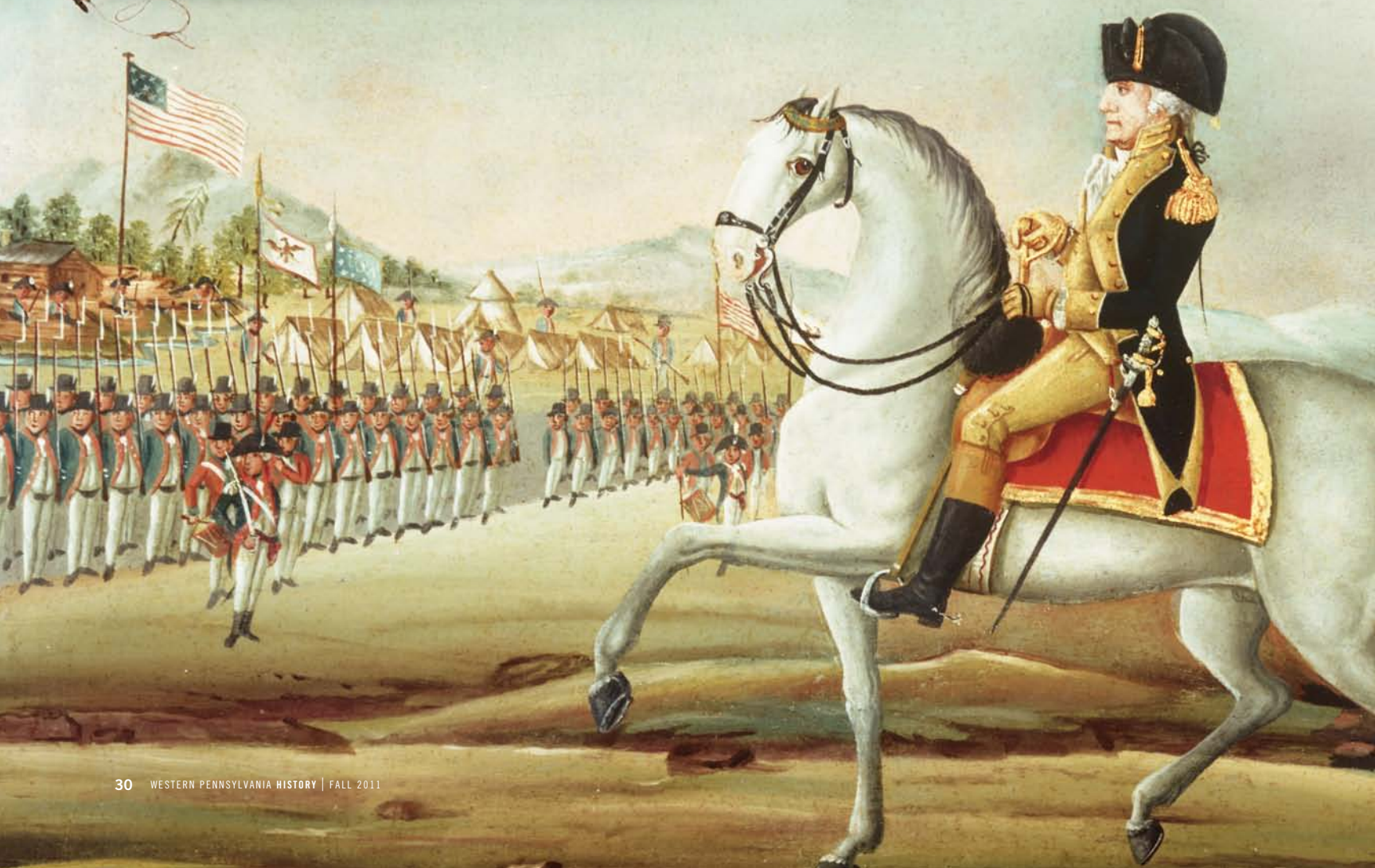


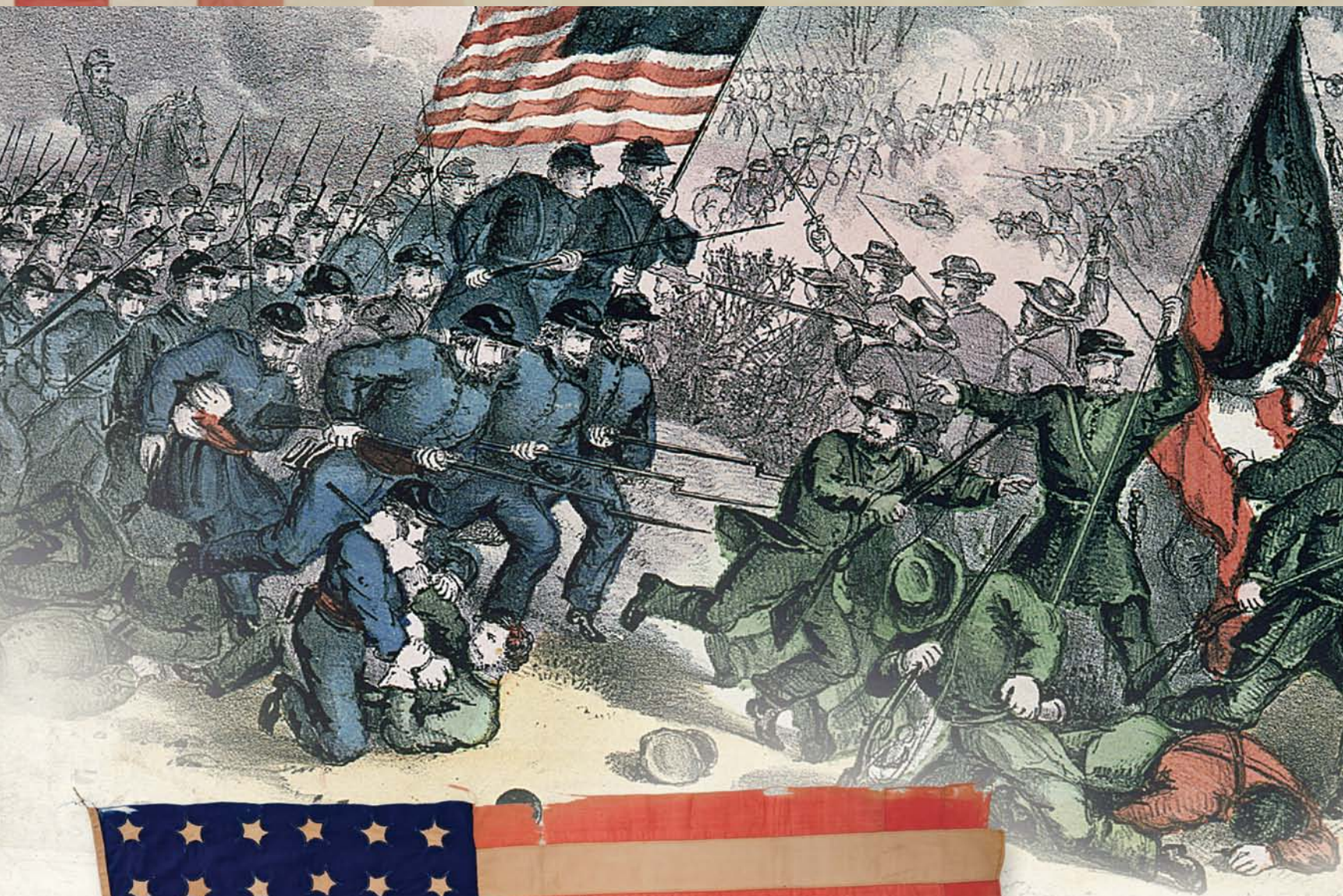


Period 14-star flags dating from Vermont's statehood are exceptionally rare, since they were never official. (When the next state, Kentucky, was admitted, the 15-star, 15-stripe flag was deemed "official" by the 1794 Flag Act, signed by President Washington.) The wooden toggles, tied to the flag's hoist strip by a line, were attached to the halyard for hoisting and securing the flag on the pole or mast. Solid lead washers added weight to stabilize the flag when hung vertically.

*General George Washington
Reviewing the Western army at
Fort Cumberland the 18th of October
1794, Frederick Kemmelmeier.*

Courtesy Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, 1958.2780.





ABOVE: This hand-colored lithograph by Currier & Ives depicts the second Battle of Bull Run, Union flag flying.

Library of Congress.



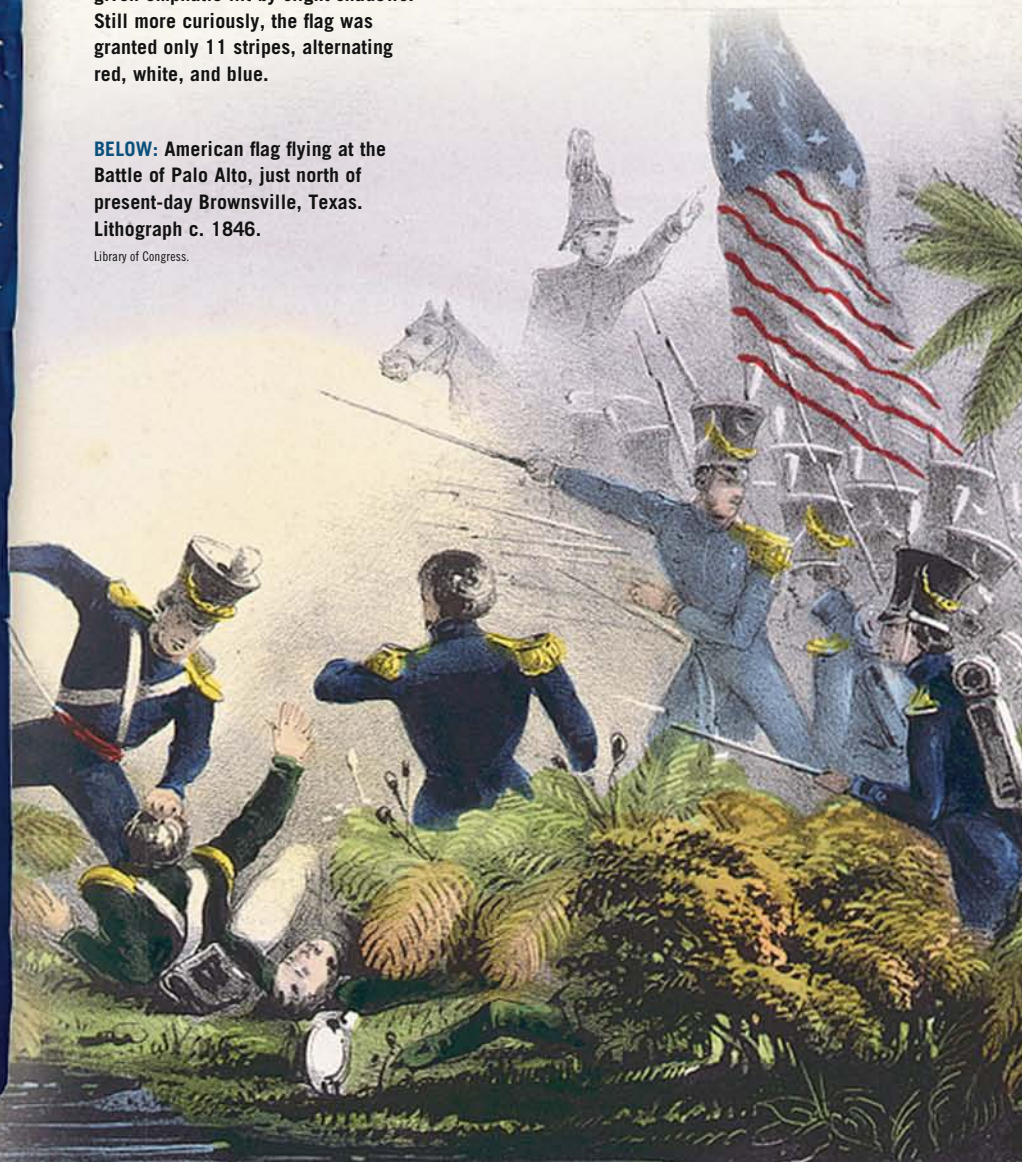
LEFT: Exquisitely crafted with handmade whipstitches, this 33-star flag is documented to have been flown by Union troops at the Battle of Bull Run in 1861. Its condition suggests that this flag was well cared for, its patches carefully matched and sewn, its fabric tenderly preserved. The soft cotton fabric's natural dyes have beautifully faded over the decades—a quality that flags made with novel artificial dyes would seldom attain.



LEFT: This peculiarly elongated 28-star flag trumpeting Texas' statehood in 1846 opted for a rectangular canton, with disciplined rows of painted stars, given emphatic lift by slight shadows. Still more curiously, the flag was granted only 11 stripes, alternating red, white, and blue.

BELOW: American flag flying at the Battle of Palo Alto, just north of present-day Brownsville, Texas. Lithograph c. 1846.

Library of Congress.



NATIONAL FLAG FOUNDATION

Western Pennsylvania is home to the National Flag Foundation, an organization dedicated to teaching respect for the U.S. flag, pride in our country, and responsible citizenship. With roots dating to the 1890s, the National Flag Foundation was established in 1968 in Pittsburgh.

For information about flag etiquette, the NFF's educational initiatives and youth programs, patriotic items for purchase, or membership, please visit www.americanflags.org or call 1-800-615-1776.



LEFT: This well-balanced and thoughtfully composed 38-star flag perfectly summarizes the Centennial State of the Union in 1876. Four stars indicate the four corners of the United States, stretching between Oregon and Florida, California, and Maine. A double ellipse, with the inner ring composed of 13 stars, embraces a prominent star recognizing Colorado, the newest state.

BELOW: The original Star Spangled Banner, which now hangs in the National Museum of American History.

Library of Congress.

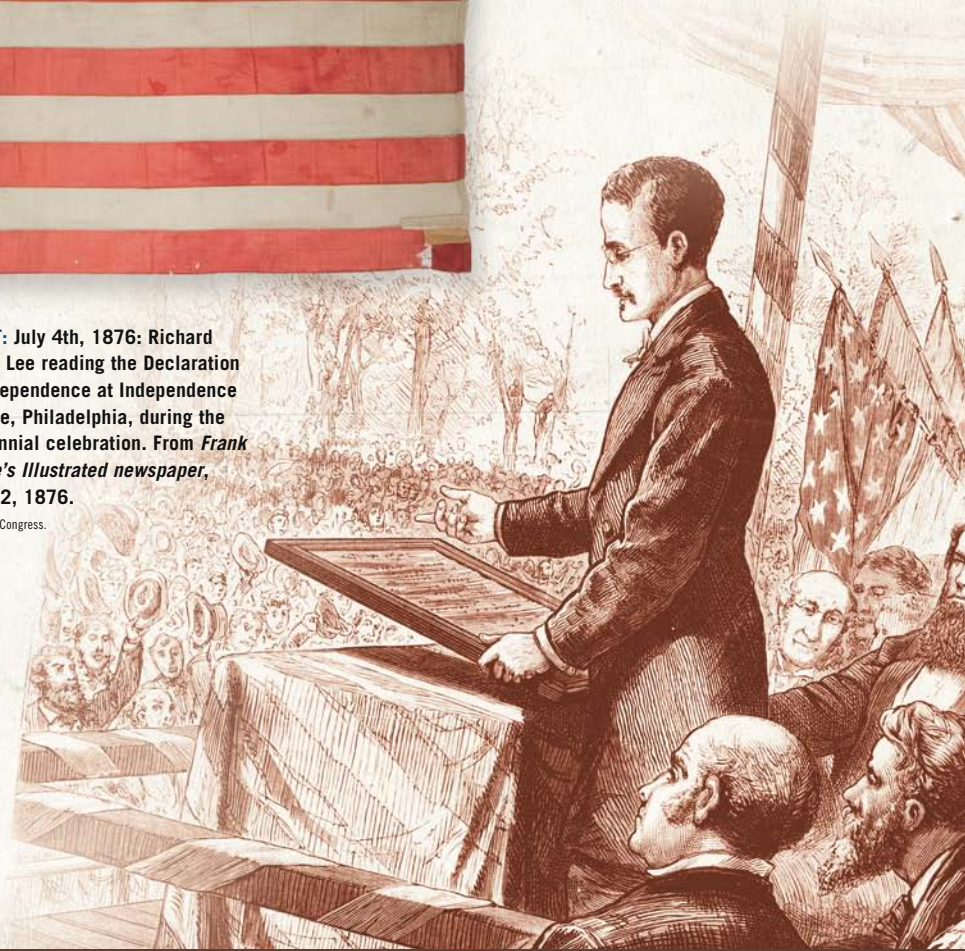


Smithsonian Institution,
National Museum of
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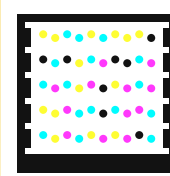
RIGHT: July 4th, 1876: Richard Henry Lee reading the Declaration of Independence at Independence Square, Philadelphia, during the centennial celebration. From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated newspaper*, July 22, 1876.

Library of Congress.



Smithsonian Connection

A piece of the flag known as the Star Spangled Banner, which flew over Fort McHenry in 1814, can be seen in the Heinz History Center's major exhibition *Stars & Stripes: An American Story*, opening September 10. The full flag, which underwent an eight-year conservation period from 1998 to 2006, is today the centerpiece of the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.



Mary Pickersgill was a successful businesswoman, activist, and flag seamstress who was hired to create the huge flag that

flew over Fort McHenry during the Battle of Baltimore in 1814. The flag inspired Georgetown lawyer Francis Scott Key to pen "The Star Spangled Banner."

Pete Keim.

Photo by Kenny Braun.

