

Basic Flag Education

History of the American Flag

The American Flag is the ultimate symbol of our country.

It is:

- The third oldest national flag in the world.
- Older than the flags of the old countries, like the Tricolor of France and the Union Jack of Great Britain.
- It was first authorized in 1777. And that day is now Flag Day, June 14.
- Just 53 days later, less than two months after being adopted, it was flying over Fort Stanwix (now Rome) in New York, when the Battle of Oriskany was fought and that was the first time our flag waved during conflict.
- It is a unique flag because it does not represent a royal family or dynasty — it represents each of you, and me and all the millions of people who are free to enjoy the freedoms of the United States of America, a democracy that celebrated 225 years under one constitution in 2013. That is something to be proud of, over 200 years under the same government.
- The spirit of this nation. Spirit, as you know, does not come from a piece of paper. It comes from people, just as your school spirit comes from all of its students. And for this country, that means all those people who have from the very first thought that we should be a nation. All of our forefathers who worked, thought, fought and, when necessary died, that you and I could be here today.
- But the flag we look at today is of course not the flag that this country originally started with; because we are not 13 colonies along the Atlantic Ocean anymore, but 50 states, across the continent and into the oceans beyond. It changed according to the way this country grew.

There are a lot of stories about the flag; perhaps two of them might be of interest.

- Betsy Ross made the first flag for General Washington—right? The answer is **Maybe Not!** At least there is no real record of that happening. There are records for the man who designed it, Francis Hopkins, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, but whether or not Ross constructed the first Flag is debatable among historians.
- There is also an affectionate name for our flag; do you know what it is? “Old Glory!” It was the name given to the first flag of a young sailor, William Driver, who had qualified to be a sea captain. It was given to him on his 21st birthday, March 17, 1824. That flag flew on his many voyages, and he took it with him when he settled in Nashville, Tennessee. He gave it to his daughter, and the family kept it until 1922. It was then sent to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C., and you can still see it today, preserved under glass.

Flag Construction

- The first decree stated that there should be a star and a stripe for every state; that was our 13 stars on a circle with the red and white stripes.
- In 1794 two new states were added and we had a flag with 15 stars and 15 stripes.
- By 1818, there were 20 states but the flag with 15 stars and stripes was still in use.
- Congress eventually passed a law that decreed the Flag would have 13 stripes for the original 13 colonies and a star would be added for each new state that joined the union. And that is the way it is today.
 - The Flag has 13 stripes, seven red and six white, with red on the top and bottom. A blue field with 50 stars is located next to the staff in the upper left corner of the flag extends from the top to the lower edge of the fourth red stripe. The stars are arranged in alternating rows of six and five representing the 50 states of the United States. ***The stars do not represent any given state, but if they did, which would be Arkansas? The 25th.***
 - Red – is for valor and zeal.
 - White – is for hope and cleanliness of life.
 - Blue - is the color of heaven and reverence.
 - Finally, the stars - the ancient symbol of the heavens. The constellation of the stars within the union, with one star for each state, represents our Federal Constitution and how our government works. Each state has its own level of government and control, and the Federal Government only has power over those areas that the individual states agreed to surrender.

When you look at that flag, you are looking at the magnificent history of all Americans who have lived before us, your own ancestors, and the most enduring nation of free people that has ever existed.

Our Flag Code

The way our flag should be treated and honored is not law, but a code that has been developed over the years. It is what each of us should want to know and follow.

Basic customs: (Section 2, Federal Flag Code)

Flying the Flag:

- Sunrise to sunset except when illuminated
- Hoisted briskly/lowered ceremoniously
- Do not fly in inclement weather, except for all weather flag

- Special days listed, but not mandatory, every day
- Display every day at public institutions
- Near every polling place on election days
- Every school on school days

How displayed: (Section 3, Federal Flag Code)

- In procession, the Flag should be carried on the right or in the center of a line of flags
- On cars at passenger side from staff
- No other flag should be flown above, or if on same level, to right of American Flag. In peacetime, one national flag is not flown higher than another, so it should be in center of any grouping at the same height.
- If displayed with other flags, none should appear above or to the right of the American Flag, and it shall be hoisted first and lowered last.
- If displayed on a staff from a building, the union (stars) should at the peak.
- If horizontal or vertical against a wall, the union will appear in **its own** upper right-hand corner.
- If suspended over a street, the Flag shall be vertical with the union to the north or east, depending on which way the street runs.
- If on a speaker's platform, should be above and behind the speaker.
- If mounted on a staff in an auditorium or room, it should be on the speaker's right, again your left when you look at it.
- On special occasions the flag may be flown at half-mast. That is done by raising the flag all the way to the top and then bringing it half way down. There are rules, for government leaders who may die, but it is always at half-mast on Memorial Day until noon, and is then raised to the top of the flagpole. When a flag at half-mast is lowered at night, it is taken all the way to the top before bringing it down.

What is disrespect? (Section 4, Federal Flag Code)

Do Not Allow:

- Union down, unless dire distress
- Flag to touch ground, water, etc
- Flag to be carried flat, but always aloft and free
- Use as wearing apparel, bedding or drapery
- Storage so it can be soiled or damaged
- Drawings or anything on it
- Its use for advertising
- Use as a uniform or costume. However, it may be placed on a uniform as a sewed on patch for certain groups.

When it is no longer fit for display, it must be destroyed in a dignified way, preferably by burning.

What must YOU do when the flag is lowered or raised or passes by as in a parade? (Section 5, Federal Flag Code)

- Stand as straight and as tall and as proud as you can be
- Face the Flag and place your right hand over your heart
- If you are wearing a cap or a hat, take it off with your right hand and hold it over your left shoulder, so that your hand is over your heart
- If the flag is passing by, as in a parade, do the same thing as the Flag goes by where you are standing

What must you do when you pledge allegiance to the flag? (Section 7, Federal Flag Code)

- Stand as straight and tall and proud as you can be
- Face the Flag and place your right hand over your heart
- If you are wearing a cap or hat, take it off with your right hand and hold it over your left shoulder, so that your hand is over your heart
- Recite the pledge in a strong, proud voice

What do you do during the national anthem? (Section 6, Federal Flag Code)

- Stand straight and tall and as proud as you can
- Face the Flag, or if it is not displayed or cannot be seen, face the music, and place your right hand over your heart
- If you are wearing a cap or hat, take it off with your right hand and hold it over your left shoulder, so that your hand is over your heart
- Hold that salute until you have sung the national anthem.

Questions for Students to Answer

1. When you say the Pledge of Allegiance, what do the first words, "I pledge allegiance to the flag ..." mean?
2. Name one thing that makes our Flag unique?
3. How many stars were on the first Flag?
4. What do those stars represent?
5. What do the colors, red, white and blue, represent?
6. Is the flag code a law?
7. Name one thing you should NEVER do to a Flag.
8. What will you tell friends and family about what you learned today?