

# Flag Etiquette





# How to Honor the Flag

There are rules in place that govern the display and handling of the national banner.

Known as the Flag Code, these guidelines have been compiled by the U.S. House of Representatives' Office of the Law Revision Counsel. They define how best to treat the Star-Spangled Banner in the most respectful manner possible:

## FLAG DOS

It is customary to position the U.S. flag on the right side when it is displayed alongside any other flag. When the American flag is part of a group of local or organizational flags, it should be situated in the center and at the highest point. International flags should be flown at an equal height to the American flag.

Adhere to directives from the president or governor regarding the lowering of the flag to half-staff, which typically follows a national tragedy or the death of a prominent figure.

The flag must first be raised to full mast before being lowered to half-staff and then raised back to full mast briefly before being lowered for the day.

When conducting an indoor gathering, position Old Glory to the speaker's right as they face the audience. Ensure that the blue area is the first to be raised when hoisting the flag



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on a rope above a sidewalk.

Make sure that the blue field of stars is pointing to the north on streets running east and west when placing a flag over the middle of a street. Conversely, on streets running north and south, the blue area of the flag should be positioned to the east.

## FLAG DON'TS

Refrain from using the flag for purposes such as covering cushions. Don't incorporate it into a costume, or use it in advertising.

It's acceptable for military personnel, police officers, firefighters and patriotic organizations to make use of a flag

patch.

Don't affix any items to a flag. It should never be used as a container for any purpose. Avoid positioning the flag with the blue area on the right side when viewed from inside any window.

Ensure that the flag is prominently displayed for

individuals who are situated outside the building.

Avoid positioning the blue section on the right shoulder of the deceased when draping over a casket. Additionally, ensure that the flag is not placed in a grave. It should never be in contact with the ground.

# History of Flag Day

There are various stories about the initial commemoration of Flag Day.

Here's what we know: Nearly all of them occurred more than 100 years after it was designated as a symbol of the nation. Here's a look back.

## A MEANINGFUL OCCASION

Flag Day is a special occasion that honors the day the Star-Spangled Banner was officially adopted by the Second Continental Congress on June 14, 1777.

Over the years, this day has become a time for people to proudly display the flag, enjoy picnics and family gatherings, participate in parades and attend local ceremonies organized by towns, patriotic organizations and veterans groups. Some flags are preserved for official retirement ceremonies.

## FINALLY SIGNED INTO LAW

Known as the Father of Flag Day, William T. Kerr founded the American Flag Day Association in 1888 in Pittsburgh, Penn., when he was a young man. Bernard Cigrand, a schoolteacher from Wisconsin, played a significant role in advocating for June 14 to become a national holiday. Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Calvin Coolidge both issued proclamations in



NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION, PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Six-year-old Johnnie Mahoney raising the flag in Central Park in New York for a Flag Day celebration held in 1918.

support of Flag Day in 1916 and 1927, respectively. But Congress didn't officially approve the national observance until 1949. President Harry Truman signed it into law.

## SCHOOL CEREMONIES

In the late 1800s, scattered schools began organizing celebrations for Flag Day. These events reportedly aimed to

educate an increasing number of immigrant children about the history of Old Glory. George Bolch, the principal of a kindergarten program in New York City, took the initiative to hold the first widely recognized ceremonies in 1889. Recognizing the significance of Bolch's efforts, the state's Department of Education mandated that all schools should adopt similar

practices. A legislative push followed to officially recognize Flag Day as a holiday in New York.

## CITIES SOLIDIFY TRADITION

The Society of Colonial Dames spearheaded a campaign to urge Philadelphia to adopt a resolution in 1893, mandating the display of the flag in the city's public build-

ings. Elizabeth Gillespie, the president of the organization, advocated for the declaration of June 14 as Flag Day. Unfortunately, resolutions proposed by women were not afforded as much attention during that era – even though Gillespie was a descendant of Benjamin Franklin. Finally, in 1937, Pennsylvania became the first state to establish Flag Day as a legal holiday.





NATIONAL PARK SERVICE/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

A group of people holding an American flag during the 2022 Hike to Honor Veterans flag folding ceremony.

# How to Fold It

## Proper flag storage involves a specific set of guidelines.

To demonstrate the utmost respect for the United States flag, it is essential to fold it in a specific manner and ensure its safe storage. The American Legion has provided a comprehensive guide on the proper way to conduct these important ceremonial acts:

### **SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS**

To start, unfurl the flag completely and fold it in half lengthwise. Fold it in half again, ensuring that the section with the stars is visible on the outside.

Begin a triangular fold by bringing the striped corner of the folded edge toward the open edge. Once the first triangle is folded, tuck the outer point inward and align it parallel to the open edge, creating a second triangle. Keep folding the flag in a triangular shape, until only the blue section is visible. The flag should ideally be folded around 12 times, when following the correct procedure.

### **GREATER MEANING**

This ceremonial folding of the Star-Spangled Banner holds significant meaning. According to AmericanLegion.org, the traditional flag-folding ceremony symbolizes the

foundational principles that our nation was built upon: In the U.S. Armed Forces, the flag is lowered, folded and vigilantly watched over throughout the night to honor those who have made important sacrifices for the United States. The next day, the flag is unfurled, serving as a representation of the nation's faith in the new day.

### **END OF SERVICE**

The flag holds significance that goes beyond being a mere piece of fabric symbolizing our nation and its achievements. The colors and design carry profound meaning in and of themselves. The flag's red and white stripes are

meant to represent the original 13 colonies, while the white stars on a blue background symbolize our 50 states. Red was chosen as a symbol of valor and bravery, while white represents purity and innocence. Blue stands for vigilance, perseverance and justice. The U.S. flag hasn't been modified since July 4, 1960, when Hawaii joined the United States.

When disposing of a worn-out flag that is no longer suitable for public display, the recommended method is burning. The flag code reminds Americans to do so discreetly, however, to avoid misinterpretation of this as a form of protest or disrespect.



# Home Flag Care

Flags that are soiled or show minor signs of damage don't necessarily have to be replaced.

In fact, the Flag Code promotes the practice of repairing or cleaning flags instead. Here's how to do it.

## WASHING AT HOME

It is considered disrespectful to allow the U.S. flag to touch the ground. If it inadvertently happens, you may end up with an unsightly stain. Address the situation promptly to prevent a lasting mark on the flag. To clean it, use cold water and a gentle detergent, and wash it by hand. After removing any dirt or grime, lay the flag flat to dry instead of hanging it, as hanging may cause the material to stretch. This will also minimize the risk of colors bleeding into each other.

## SEWING THEM UP

There are other considerations beyond dirt, air pollutants, salt and debris. Regularly examine the banner for any signs of damage or wear caused by constant exposure to sun, rain and wind. This is especially important if you use an all-weather flag, as it may require extra attention after significant storms. Even minor imperfections can quickly escalate into significant holes during severe weather conditions. Remember that frequent repairs can alter the flag's



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shape and overall appearance, so approach any modifications with utmost care.

## WEATHER CONCERNS

Regrettably, these measures will not ensure the perpetual display of your flag – especially if it is exposed to rain or shine. According to govern-

ment estimates, an average cotton or nylon flag is expected to last approximately 90 days when displayed daily from dawn to dusk, without any adverse weather conditions. However, flags that are flown continuously for 24 hours may only last one-fourth as long before they start to

fade and deteriorate. Do not place the flag where the wind will push it against tree branches, cables or wires and other rough surfaces. Small tears can quickly transform into large tatters. Keep the flagpole free of rust, scale and corrosion since that can also damage Old Glory.

## DRY CLEANING

Clean the flag regularly before discoloration sets into the fabric. Experts recommend professional dry cleaning for indoor or parade flags. Many dry cleaners will clean your flag free of charge — especially around established holidays like Flag Day and July 4th.

# Why ‘Old Glory’?

A number of fascinating tales involving American flags have been passed down through the ages, but the one involving Capt. William Driver remains one of the most memorable.

A brave sea captain who sailed around the world, Driver is renowned today for calling the American flag, “Old Glory.” His flag traveled from the deck of Driver’s ship to an eventual home in Washington D.C.’s esteemed Smithsonian, serving as a testament to the unwavering American spirit.

## ON THE SEAS

Driver was born on March 17, 1803, in Salem, Mass. He joined the Merchant Marines at age 14. His mother gave Driver

a 17-by-10-inch flag (then adorned with just 24 stars) in 1831, after she and other Salem seamstresses meticulously created it. Proudly displayed on his Charles Doggett ship, the flag was lovingly dubbed “Old Glory” by Driver. He’d carry this cherished banner for the rest of his career as a sea captain.

## CIVIL WAR BREAKS OUT

Driver finally retired in 1837 to a home in Nashville, Tenn., where he once again proudly exhibited the flag. He and his family later stitched 10 additional stars onto the flag, along with a small white anchor on the lower right corner. Into the early 1860s, however, tensions between states in the North and the South began to escalate, leading to Tennessee’s secession. According to the Smithsonian, that’s when Driver’s flag became an iconic symbol of loyalty to the Union.

Confederates were aware of the legend of “Old Glory,” and regularly searched Driver’s house and property in search of it. They never found it, because Driver had sewn the banner inside a quilt and then hid it under his mattress. When the 6th Ohio Infantry recaptured Nashville for the Union in February 1862, Driver asked the regiment’s captain if “Old Glory” could be temporarily displayed over the Capitol building. Driver stood guard with his flag until a new one was installed the next day.

## LASTING LEGACY

Driver died in 1886, prompting Congress to authorize a then-rare continuous display of the American flag at his grave. In 1922, Driver’s daughter Mary Jane Roland presented the original “Old Glory” flag to President Warren G. Harding, who then donated it to the Smithsonian Institution, where it remains today.



# Displaying the Flag

Honor the sacrifices made by countless men and women who have defended the United States flag over the years by showing utmost respect and care toward the American flag.

Follow proper etiquette when displaying the flag at home, or organizing an event, parade or any gathering where the flag will be displayed.

## WHEN TO DISPLAY

Title 4 of the United States Code, Chapter 1, section 4 states that the flag should be displayed from sunrise to sunset on buildings and on stationary flag staffs in open areas. If properly illuminated, the flag may be displayed 24 hours a day. The flag should not be displayed on days with inclement weather, unless it is made of all-weather material.

Additionally, the flag should be displayed on all holidays. It should also be displayed near the main administration building of public institutions, at polling places on election days and at schoolhouses.

## HOW TO DISPLAY

There are appropriate times to display the flag, and also a proper way to display it. If you are flying the flag on a pole alongside other flags, the U.S. flag must be positioned higher



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than the rest unless there are other international flags; then the flags should be flown at the same height with the U.S. flag on the right of the other flags.

When displaying the flag on a speaker's platform, it should be placed above and behind the speaker or to the speaker's right.

On days when the flag is

flown at half-staff, it should first be raised to the peak momentarily and then lowered to the half-staff position. Before being lowered completely, the flag should once again be raised to the peak.

## IMPORTANT NOTES

The United States flag must be treated with the highest level of care and reverence.

There are specific guidelines that should never be violated when handling the flag. The flag must never touch the ground or water when it is being displayed. Additionally, Old Glory should never be laid flat or carried horizontally; it should always be flown freely and aloft.

Under no circumstances should the flag be used to

carry, hold, or transport any objects. According to Section 8 of the United States Code, the flag should never be displayed with the blue portion (or "union") facing down. The area with stars representing each state should always be upright. The only exception to this rule is during times of extreme distress where there is a threat to life or property.



# Our First Flag

The style and design of the U.S. flag were confirmed by the Continental Congress on June 14, 1777.

Our banner would boast 13 stripes, alternating between red and white, with 13 stars arranged in a blue square to the upper left. The stars represented the original 13 colonies. Here's more about our first flag.

## INITIAL DESIGN

The initial arrangement of the 13 stars formed a circular pattern, ensuring that no colony was given prominence over another. Betsy Ross, a Philadelphia-based upholsterer, was reportedly selected by a group led by George Washington to complete the design before the first flag was presented to Congress. However, there is no evidence to support this popular belief in the records of the Continental Congress or Washington's personal diaries.

According to Charles Thomson, the secretary of the Continental Congress and a key figure in the creation of the American seal, each color on the flag was deliberately selected. Valor was symbolized by the color red, justice and perseverance were embodied by the color blue, and purity was represented by the color white.

## FIRST DISPLAY

The flag made its debut in



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battle on Sept. 11, 1777, during the Battle of the Brandywine, and was first flown over a foreign land in 1778 after the capture of a British fort in the Bahamas. Over time, there have been a total of 27 different versions of the flag, reflecting the addition of new states to the U.S. Initially, both

stars and stripes were incorporated as new states joined the union, resulting in a 15-stripe flag created by Mary Young Pickersgill to include Vermont and Kentucky in 1795. This particular flag, which is believed to have inspired Francis Scott Key to write the National Anthem, is now on

display at the Smithsonian.

## LATER UPDATES

Subsequently, the flag design reverted to 13 stripes, with only stars being added. A major update followed in 1818, as five more stars were added to symbolize the new states of Mississippi, Indiana,

Louisiana, Ohio and Tennessee. The flag was first called "Old Glory" in 1831 by Capt. William Driver, a shipmaster from Salem, Mass., when the banner only had 24 stars. The most recent modification occurred in 1960, as the number of stars increased from 49 to 50 after Hawaii became a state.